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ABSTRACT

This issue features articles by adult basic education (ABE) practitioners within the field about their approaches to teaching essay writing. In preparing this issue, nine teachers attempted to "catch themselves in the act" of teaching essay writing and subsequently document their approaches and questions. Most of the articles explain how a student essay came about. The other articles look reflectively at what teaching, especially teaching essay writing, has taught them. All of the essays reflect classroom moments. The issue also includes several essays by and photographs of students. After an introduction (Martha Merson), the following nine essays are included: "Talking through an Essay: Organizing What Your Students Want to Say" (Allison Hoskins); "Bumps and Potholes: An Essay on Teaching Writing" (Marsha Watson); "Writing Essays: A Frustrating Experience for Bilingual Students" (Kerline Auguste Tofuri); "Finding Ways 'Not to Teach'" (Xiaowei He); "Women's History Month: Studying Women through Biography" (Martha Gray); "Bridging the 'Information Gap': The Content of Writing" (Dilip Dutt); "Organizing Inspiration" (Marty Kingsbury); "Our Piece of Town" (Sam Bernstein); and "What the Writer Brings to the Teaching of Writing: Teaching English to Adult ESOL Learners" (Deborah Schwartz). (KC)

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CONNECTIONS

A Journal of Adult Literacy

Catching Ourselves in the Act: Writing About Teaching Writing

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Connections: A Journal of Adult Literacy

Volume VI Summer 1996

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Connections is a publication of the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, a joint project of Roxbury Community College and the University of Massachusetts/Boston, funded primarily by the Massachusetts Department of Education/Adult and Community Learning Services, the Massachusetts Higher Education Coordinating Council, and the City of Boston's EDIC/Jobs and Community Services Department.

The A.L.R.I. was created in 1983 as part of the Boston Adult Literacy Initiative and also serves as the Greater Boston Regional Support Center for the state's SABES network. The purpose of the A.L.R.I. is to provide training, technical assistance and other resources to Boston-area adult basic education programs. Our address is 989 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215. Our phone number is 617-782-8956; our fax number is 617-782-9011.

Connections is intended to provide an opportunity for adult educators, particularly those in the Boston area, to communicate with colleagues, both locally and nationwide. Adult literacy/adult basic education practitioners need a forum to express their ideas and concerns and to describe their students, their programs, and their own accomplishments; we are glad to be able to continue providing this opportunity.

We welcome your reactions to this journal or to any of the articles in it. We also want to strongly encourage teachers, counselors, administrators, aides, volunteers, students—everyone involved in this field—to think about sharing your experiences, your ideas, your problems and solutions with others by writing for the next issue of *Connections*. Please contact us; we'd be glad to talk with you about your ideas for an article.

The articles included here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Adult Literacy Resource Institute or its sponsoring institutions or funders, including the Massachusetts Department of Education or the federal government. The A.L.R.I./SABES Greater Boston Regional Support Center is currently supported by roughly $183,000 of federal funds, which is approximately 48% of its total budget; the budget includes no funds from non-governmental sources.

Permission must be obtained from the A.L.R.I. before reprinting an article in another publication or for widespread distribution.

For this issue of *Connections:*

Project Coordinator: Martha Merson
Editorial Committee: Dilip Dutt, Allison Hoskins, Martha Merson, Deborah Schwartz, Kerline Auguste Tofuri
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Introduction

Martha Merson

The essay as a form of writing is laden with history and mystique so that one hardly feels qualified to say anything about it without quoting a Greek philosopher or a British rhetoritician or, at the very least, a foremost essayist of our times. Writers who use the essay form today are often syndicated columnists who typically write at a reading level that is difficult for ABE students, making it a challenge for them to use those essays as models for their own writing. Even I have difficulty believing that essayists such as Patricia Smith or Ellen Goodman use the very same writing process I use and teach. However, reading others' essays enables students to analyze the organization, syntax, and content that others have struggled to shape into the "three paragraph plus introduction" format. A local ABE teacher, Jessica Spohn, once suggested that a collection of student essays would be useful for her and for her GED, EDP, and college-bound students. I agreed, the A.L.R.I. staff concurred, and out of that suggestion grew this volume.

As with past issues of *Connections*, this volume features writing primarily by practitioners within the field about the approaches to teaching essay writing they have used. In preparing this issue, nine teachers attempted to "catch themselves in the act" of teaching essay writing and subsequently document their approaches and questions. Teachers were asked to submit student-written essays and to write an article explaining how that writing came about. Most of the articles do this, illustrating the variety of approaches and starting points one can take in teaching essay writing. The other articles look reflectively at what teaching, especially teaching essay writing, has taught them. Like Xiaowei He's article, all of the essays in this collection talk about classroom moments, hence this volume's title "Catching Ourselves in the Act." If we can capture those moments, examine the interactions, and learn from our instinctive response or our intuitive reactions, we can ensure that our actions are in line with our intentions.

This issue also includes several essays by students. Of course, learner writing has been printed in publications such as *Need I Say More* and continues to be printed in program newsletters. For whatever reasons, essays are not the majority of writing pieces that are solicited, contributed, or printed. This volume is unique in its attention to student-written *essays* and to the teachers' perspectives on the process and product. While the learner essays here are generally in their second, third, or fourth draft, they represent students' writing early in their development as writers. Therefore, the models are ones that students can imagine their own writing resembling, and teachers can encourage students to critique them, to pull them apart, in a way s/he couldn't if the class were using the writing of a class member.

The four teachers who comprised the editorial committee for this volume—Dilip Dutt, Allison Hoskins, Deborah Schwartz, and Kerline Tofuri—met several times to think through what would most useful to themselves and their students as well as to other teachers and students. In the spirit of "catching ourselves in the act," we used newsprint to quickly brainstorm in pairs what we believed are the fundamental issues in teaching beginning writing. Although this feels like yet another tactic to reduce all careful thought to two-second sound bites, it can be helpful to structure writing and talking in ways that encourage us to blurt out our beliefs rather than to couch them in language that is suitable for the occasion. The instructions for this activity were: "Write what you believe about essay writing. We have four minutes." In four minutes there

is no time to be choosy about words. There is no time to waste on semantics. There is no time to couch a thought in an inoffensive way. The censorship mechanism is off. We wrote that we believe:

- Essay writing draws on critical thinking and logical reasoning more than other forms.
- Essay writing is more often for an outside, judgmental audience than other forms of writing.
- Teachers need to confront learners' expectations of what essay writing is.
- Teachers need to deprogram learners. We need to show learners they're smart and know what they're talking about.

Stripped to the core, these are the beliefs that stood.

Then the pairs moved on to a different question: "What do you believe about creative writing?" In the moment, a pair wrote: *"All writing is creative writing. The distinctions come when a writer picks a structure or genre. The structure needs to fit what you're doing."* Returning to the full group, I wanted to know if everyone believed this statement. "Do you know what you are saying?" I prodded. "Many teachers far and wide believe essay writing comes from an outline. They think it emanates from a chart or from a list of three reasons or from a recipe for success they learned in a book. They don't think it comes from a creative place. We can print this as long as we realize what we are saying." The group stood by the statement.

Leafing through the articles, readers can look for the disjunction or overlap between creative writing and the analytic essay. Two articles speak to obstacles that can interfere with the merging of a creative and analytic voice. Allison Hoskins writes about overcoming an artificial rift between her own oral and written language. Applying her experience, she experiments with her GED writing classes to capitalize on her students' strong oral language. Dilip Dutt observes the difficulty his students have in writing when they lack background knowledge on the subject in question. Advocating that teachers bridge the information gap, his essay presents a view that is not so popular in literacy circles.

Four articles in particular speak to various questions that surfaced in practice. Marsha Watson, who taught writing within the context of preparing students for the External Diploma Program, explores the quality of the experience we present and the quality of the questions we pose, some of which prompt highly detailed, meaning-laden writing, while some prompt only the most rote of answers. Marty Kingsbury explains the assignment and note-taking done prior to the development of essays in which her students explore their educational autobiographies. Martha Gray looks back at a thematic unit on women's history she did with her class and wonders about the match between her expectations, the creative parts of the unit, and the reports her students subsequently produced. Deborah Schwartz draws on her experience as a creative writer, both in the classroom and in her article, to weave together theory, practice, and analysis. Looking at her participatory practice, at the use of students' voice, and at the space she seeks to create for creative expression as well as for critical distance, she shares and examines three vignettes from her classes.

The belief that learners' histories need to be taken into account in the classroom is an accepted idea in adult ed. The editorial board members began looking back at their own experiences with essay writing. In doing so, they found the range of feelings from comfort to discomfort, from an excitement about the unpredictability of writing to a strong instinct to run from it. In addition to articles included in this volume in which autobiography plays an explicit role, Sam Bernstein's and Kerline Tofuri's articles explore the ways that students' present circumstances and current attitudes influence their writing curriculum. Sam takes an ethnographic approach to descriptions of his Chinatown students and program to examine the implications of their fragmented lives and fragmented knowledge of English on a whole language writing curriculum. Kerline, a Haitian immigrant herself, identifies with her students' history and present reality. The frustration she feels in being the best writing teacher possible mirrors their frustration in writing the best essays possible. Disentangling the factors that lead to frustration and learning to cope with it are her topics.

After inspiring students to write, urging them to revise, collecting their drafts, and then struggling with our own topic sentences, organizing our own inspiration, and thanklessly revising, we could all wonder aloud: Are we there yet? Is it right yet? Are we, students and teachers alike, simply yanking on a stuck door, not able to get in, not able to call this genre of essay writing our own? Fortunately, through the prose of the teachers and the learners in this volume, one begins to hear a reassuring answer: Trust the experience—be it attendance at a recent concert or a long-stored memory; nurture the creativity—be it expressed in notes or discussion; step back from the draft—be it to organize the parts or to explain significance to a reader. If there is one message in this volume, it is that essay writing should not be left solely to the accomplished writers among us. With guidance, our students can call this a genre of their own. Read on. As you turn the pages, I hope the intimidating mystique of the essay retreats, and you are left with the desire to write—alone and with your students. •

Talking Through an Essay: Organizing What Your Students Want to Say

Allison Hoskins

As a GED instructor, teaching writing has always been difficult for me. I dislike writing and try to avoid it at all costs. I have found over the past two years of teaching that many of my students have the same feelings that I do about writing. There is no doubt in my mind that writing is my least favorite activity. I dread it with all of my heart and soul. For the most part, so do my students.

Personally, I began to hate writing when I entered Mrs S.'s fourth grade classroom. She began the first day of classes with a lecture about how she would be expecting "real" essays from us. She didn't want to see rambling third grade essays. The only other thing I remember is that she discussed how an essay should be organized, its different parts, and what they were supposed to contain.

Previous to this, I had written much the way that I thought and spoke. But my teacher made it clear that this form of writing was not organized properly and was not clear enough. This year I began to feel that the way I thought and spoke had little to do with the way I needed to write.

Every essay of mine would be returned with the comments on how informal it was and how I needed to be less "talky" in my writing. My teacher was never happy with my organization. My ideas were present but were never clearly organized. She would show the class examples of students' essays that she considered wonderful, but they sounded very formal and foreign to me. I didn't understand how to change my thoughts into the product she was looking for.

After that year, I was sure that I didn't know how to write and began to avoid it at all costs. The negative reception to my writing led me to hate any writing. By the time that college came around I was a writing wreck. I would wait until the last moment to start papers. I would fumble around trying to write in a different style and trying to sound formal—like the papers that I saw around me.

It wasn't until my sophomore year that someone broke the hold of Mrs. S.'s lessons. I was in the office of my history professor discussing my midterm paper. I had received a "D" and he was trying to figure out why I had written such a bad paper. He felt that in the class I showed that I knew the class material and that I participated fully and completely.

He spent the next thirty minutes asking me about the topic, what my argument was, and what my evidence for my thesis was. Strangely, unlike in my paper, I was able to answer all of his questions clearly and concisely. He said that it was clear that I knew my stuff, but he was perplexed by what I had handed in. Before I got up to leave he handed me a page of notes that he had taken during our talk. From these notes, he helped me to make an outline of what my paper should look like. Included in this was a clear understanding about what should be in my introduction, what my supporting arguments were, what examples I needed to use to back up my arguments, and what my conclusion was.

Suddenly, the connection between what I wanted to say and the organization of an essay was made clear for me. He had given me two very important things. First, he proved to me that in fact I wasn't stupid or incapable of writing. Second, he introduced me to a method for me to use to translate the ideas that I had into an organized essay. I had all of the ideas in my head, but I had never learned how to organize them into formal writing. I found that after that I could talk myself through an essay, and begin to write down my ideas for organization.

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The Writing "Disease" and Its Cure

I have seen the same writing "disease" in my students. Somewhere in school they began to see writing as a foreign thing. They were expected to begin to organize their ideas more formally and, for the most part, they didn't get an adequate explanation of how to do it. Without a bridge to help them see how to translate what they were thinking and talking about into an essay structure, they had begun to hate writing as much as I did.

As part of preparing for the GED, my students are expected to write an organized formal essay that has a clear beginning, middle and end. It has to have supporting ideas and examples, to answer the question and stay on topic. Yet it also has to have their personality and ideas in it. For most of the students this is an unpopular and unsuccessful activity.

When I first began to teach writing, I followed the methods outlined in many of the GED texts. I taught my students about the parts of an essay, what these parts should look like, and how to brainstorm lists of ideas to write the essay about. I showed them examples of "wonderful" essays and tried to explain what was expected from them. Basically, I had taken the Mrs. S. approach to teaching essays and, as in my experience, this method never seemed to give enough to my students. I was not teaching my students how to take the thoughts from their heads and put them on paper. Just explaining the concept of what was expected from them and what an essay looked like was too abstract and too much of a reach for many of my students.

When we talked about an essay topic as a class or one-on-one, my students never lacked any ideas on the particular topic. They had reasons to back up what they believed, and they could have a coherent conversation about them. But, when it came time to write, they wrote incoherent and boring essays that lacked detail. Many of my students said that when they were asked to write an essay they felt unsure about what to do and really didn't want to write.

I think that both their lack of understanding of how to put together an essay and their avoidance of it generally caused them to produce essays like the following examples that my students wrote in response to the question of why they were studying for the GED:

> *I am studying for the GED because I want to get a better job and be an example for my son I didn't finish shool and need accomplishment.*

> *I am studying for the GED because I want skills training. Without training I cannot get a job that pays more than $4.00 and I have to work at Mcdonalds or Wendys and don't make money to live for my kids and my family.*

These were students who would argue with me about any subject and I would read their essays wondering if they were the same people when writing.

I realized that like myself they needed to learn about connecting speaking and writing. I wanted to develop a method that would help my students make this connection. I had two important goals that I wanted to accomplish in this new method. First, I wanted to provide my students with an understanding that anything that they could speak about, they could write about. Second, I wanted to give them a written guide to explicitly show them how to organize their ideas into a formal essay structure. I hoped to give them what my history professor had given me.

I decided that I would have students work on essays by talking about the topic and writing out an outline for their essay from their conversation. My original plan had been to have this be a pair-work exercise. As a pair they would talk about the topic and write down notes on their discussion. From this I planned to have them fill out an outline of their ideas.

I quickly realized that this was not going to be enough for my students to see the connection between what they could talk about and what they could write about. I decided that for the first few times I had to work one-on-one, just as my professor had with me.

As it turned out, I worked one-to-one with each of my students to develop an outline for their essays. I asked each of my students to read over the essay question and think about it for about five minutes. Then together we would decide which side of the issue they wanted to write about. From there, I set up a paper that would be the basis for the written guide I wanted to leave for them. We would talk about the topic for about ten minutes as I filled out the sheet with the appropriate information from our talk.

Throughout our conversations, I would ask them if they thought certain examples fit with the topic, if they could think of examples to back up their ideas, and if they were really answering the question. After filling out the sheet, we talked about how the information would fit into an introduction, how to set up the supporting paragraphs, and what kind of conclusion they had. We had talked about all of the parts of an essay in the class before, so they were familiar with what the different parts of the essay were and what they were for.

This method worked extremely well. All of my students were able to produce essays that were much longer, better organized and generally clearer. There was one down side. This method could only be used with a small class, where I could afford to spend

individual time with all of my students. This last cycle, I was faced with a much larger class size that did not allow for the one-to-one interaction that I had in the smaller class. I found that I needed to adjust this approach to explicitly demonstrate the organization of an essay to a large group.

Using a Writing Organizer

For the larger group, I developed a standardized writing organizer that my students could use to organize their ideas before writing. The one that I use (and that is printed here) is adapted from different organizers found in *Teaching Adolescents with Learning Disabilities: Strategies and Methods,* edited by Deshler, Ellis, and Lenz (Love, 1996). This organizer was very similar to the informal one that I wrote up when working one-to-one, but was much clearer to understand and easier to use with a larger group.

Instead of working individually, I planned to teach my students formal essay structure in a group. My first step was to explain to my students that the GED essay would expect them to write a clear organized essay that would have a main idea and at least two supporting points. I showed them the organizer and explained that it was going to be used to help them write better essays.

I then introduced an essay topic to the class—the pros and cons of having children—and asked everybody what position on the topic they wanted to take. All but one said they wanted to talk about the pros, so I modeled writing the position in the top section of the organizer. After deciding upon this position, as a class we discussed the topic and brainstormed supporting points. I tried to act as a notetaker, writing down all of the different points that students gave. I wrote about 25 reasons on the board, excluding repetitions. We had everything from "Having children guarantees someone will love you" to "Baby's clothes are cute." As in the past, this part of the exercise proved to be the most interesting because students became somewhat animated and interested in the topic. Even students who rarely spoke up in class volunteered at least one idea. On more controversial suggestions, students usually began to debate with each other.

After generating this list on the board, the students and I went through it, deciding the three points that we should choose to write about. We reviewed the list, asking, "Does this answer the question?" After the first two or three examples, they caught on to what made a point viable. First we narrowed the list to ten points, and then we narrowed it further to three by emphasizing the ease of coming up with examples for each point. I tried to show how some reasons lent themselves to compelling examples. Everyone agreed that there wasn't much to say about the cuteness of baby's clothes.

There are two major things that I emphasize in this interaction. First, I want my students to be able to check if a certain point actually answers the question. Second, will my students be able to generate some good examples to back up a point? I want my students to see that they need to keep on track concerning the question and to choose strong points.

Once the points were decided upon, I had my students fill them in on their organizers. Then as a class we brainstormed for one or two examples to back up each point, following the same process we used earlier. Again working as a notetaker, I placed these on the board. As a class, we narrowed these down based upon whether the examples really backed up the point and

STUDENT WRITING ORGANIZER		
What option are you choosing? Positives, negatives, or both?		
Point 1	**Point 2**	**Point 3**
Example	**Example**	**Example**

whether they were strong examples.

This process usually took up about one hour of our class time. During the next class, I had everyone take out their organizers and we discussed the different parts of the essay and how they related to each of the organizer parts. The organizer allowed my students to better see the connection between their ideas and the parts of a traditional essay. They can see that the introduction has to include their position on the topic and has to introduce the three points that the essay is going to mention. They can see that there will be three supporting paragraphs that correspond with each point and that these paragraphs are made up of the point and the examples. They can see that the conclusion has to mention briefly all that has been written on the organizer and has to sum it all up. Each piece of information is available to them in the organizer.

After our classroom discussion, I generally had my students write an essay on the topic. This worked out well in several respects. First, students began to see that there are many right ways to write an essay. They don't have to write an essay that is exactly the same as their neighbor's. By showing students other students' writing, they saw that even with the same points and examples, essays can take on different styles and wording that are all correct. Generating many essays on one topic also allowed them to see good examples of essays and allowed for a discussion of the differences between the good and not-so-good essays. With the organizer, I was better able to demonstrate for my students how the good essays organized the information so that it is clear and understandable. I focused on the relationship between the parts of well-written essays and the information on the organizer.

After several practices as a class, I generally start moving students towards filling out their organizers on their own as a pre-writing exercise. I ask them to choose a partner and to talk to each other in the process of filling out the organizer. After they have both filled out the organizer, I look it over and take the opportunity to ask them questions about what they are going to write or to question whether a point or example they have chosen is appropriate. I then have them write their essays and together we look at the final product and any organizational problems that it has. Later on, I ask students to fill out the organizer on their own as pre-writing before their essay. I look over the organizer before they write to make sure that they are on the right track. In both of these instances, I look over their final essay and focus on the organization of it and whether they used the organizer correctly.

Conclusion

In both the small and large classes I have found that the results of this exercise were threefold. First, my students were able to produce an essay that was well organized and interesting. They were no longer writing down any idea that came to them. The points that they made were direct answers to the question. The essays conformed to what was expected for the GED; they had an introduction, supporting points, and examples.

Here is an example from one of the students whose essay was shown before:

> *There are advantages and disadvantages to winning the lottery. The main advantage is that you will have enough money. The main disadvantage is there are people who will try to scam you out of your money.*
>
> *If you win the lottery, you can have as many kids as you want. You can raise them in a good household. You will never be broke and you don't have to work if you don't want to. Even better, you can buy stuff you couldn't afford before.*
>
> *There are some disadvantages too. People will try to be your friend in order to get your money. Your family might even try to get your money.*
>
> *I think winning the lottery is the best thing that can happen to you. You need to have a straight mind and ignore people who try to take advantage of you.*
>
> *Teherence L.*

Second, they began to get an understanding of how to use an organizer to keep themselves on track. Most of my students said that they now understood how they were supposed to organize an essay. They saw the connection between the parts of the essay and how to take the information they wanted to get across and make it fit into essay form. They could use their own ideas and transform them into an essay.

And third, most of my students felt better about their writing. It was no longer a foreign idea. Writing suddenly had to do with their ideas and their thoughts. Instead of feeling that they couldn't write, they knew that they were able to write a basic essay and that they had a tool to use.

I found that people who usually wrote only four or five sentences filled out a whole page using an organizer. People who rarely stayed on the subject were suddenly clear. Although the essays of most of my students aren't perfect, the structure that the GED examiners were looking for is there. My experiment with organizers proved to me that as a teacher I needed to provide more explicit instruction and tools for my students to write their GED essays. •

Bumps and Potholes: An Essay on Teaching Writing

Marsha Watson

For five years I taught at the Haitian Multi-Service Center in Boston. When I look back, I realize writing proved to be the most difficult skill for students to master. Generally each had problems starting assignments, many considered rewriting tedious, and most preferred one-on-one instructor opinion as opposed to group or peer feedback; furthermore, all had difficulty writing acceptable essays. As the instructor I needed to determine how to organize a highly structured class environment while accommodating students of varying reading and writing abilities. I wanted to introduce the idea that computers are a writing tool in much the same way paper and pencil are, and it was critical to assist students in simultaneously satisfying the External Diploma Program requirements while acquiring the skills necessary for college entry.

I believe all students can write and that they all have something to say. In view of this, I see my role as helping them figure out what they want to say and how to help them get the words in their heads onto the paper. How do students develop interesting ideas to develop and pursue on paper? What is the starting point? What occurred in my classroom is tough to describe in a logical, coherent and sequential manner. The writing path we took was not linear or straightforward. It curved and veered over bumps and potholes. A good comparison would be to a car that you are never sure will start. Monday you may only need to pump the gas pedal to get going; Thursday you may need to pop the clutch. Sometimes we would run out of gas and have to "push" the essay home. I have asked questions, prodded students, written what they dictated, met them before class, after class, refused to give up on them when they thought they had nothing more to say. Occasionally the writing flowed relatively well and it was smooth sailing.

This article will not concentrate on the entire EDP program and process. Instead I want to discuss only essay writing. To acquire a diploma through the EDP, students must complete several writing assignments of varying length, ranging from a one-paragraph choice justification in Task II to a business letter and resume in Task III to a 300-word cultural background essay in Task V. I will describe the processes students and I followed to complete three of the assignments: 1) critiques of a live performance and an art exhibit; 2) a discussion of family culture; and 3) an essay discussing an aspect of the student's cultural background.

The EDP, the Haitian Center, and the Students

A brief introduction to the External Diploma Program (EDP) is critical to understanding what happened in my classroom. The EDP is an alternative diploma program for adults administered by the Boston Public Schools (BPS). EDP is an applied performance, competency-based assessment program. In fact, the program is set up as a three-step process. Step 1 is the Diagnostic phase; Step 2, the Five Tasks & Spot Checks; and Step 3, the Individual Marketable Skill.

The diagnostic tests measure basic skills in reading, math and writing. Following the diagnostic phase, students move into the task phase which consists of fixed competency-based tasks that students pass by demonstrating 100% competence over the skill area tested. The five tasks are arranged thematically: Community Resources, Consumer Awareness, Occupation & Career Awareness, Health, and Government & Society. While some of the skills are useful in a life skills context, they are often at odds with a program design that stresses academic preparation. This article will focus on the critiques from Community Resources (Task I) and the essays from Government & Society

(Task V). Each task has an accompanying Spot Check. The Spot Checks provide students the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery over the competencies embedded and completed within the task. Both the task and spot check are sent to the BPS for correction.

The final step is the Individual Marketable Skill. Students demonstrate a skill or talent that is marketable and that they have performed consistently over a specified period of time. There are five predetermined choices and each requires supporting documentation. The options are employment for a specific period, 375 hours of skills training, 350 hours of volunteer work, two college courses, or parenting.

The HMSC began offering the EDP program in 1991. As Coordinator, my responsibilities included recruitment, orientation, assessment, instruction and higher education counseling for pre-EDP (L4) and EDP (L5) students. A vast majority (90%) of students entering the program expressed a desire to attend college. Typically, however, none had any idea of how to get there. They had little knowledge of the process or of the requirements for admissions. Most lacked a clear understanding of what to expect academically. Consequently, I concentrated on exploring a more universal instructional methodology designed to take students beyond the EDP and further along the road of higher education. The EDP program does not provide instructional support. In fact, the model calls for students to work on their own and attend weekly individual assessment sessions at their learning center. However, the HMSC provided classroom based instructional support for students. Students expected this traditional structure, and it proved to be an efficacious method for them to complete the program requirements.

The overall atmosphere of the HMSC at that time contributed greatly to the success rates of the students. The environment was one of encouragement and high expectations. Students "owned" the Center; it was their place. Our most successful students were those invested in the process who felt a sense of ownership, not to be confused with "motivation" or the over-used terms "self-esteem" and "empowerment." Students who could not or would not attend classes on a regular basis, who were unwilling or unable to participate in supplemental education activities offered through the Study Center, or who did not allow themselves in many small ways to become a part of the "community of learners" (I'm using the term inclusively to describe students and instructors) had the least success. Those with a shared sense of belonging and accomplishment were the ones who earned diplomas.

Potential EDP candidates were placed in the pre-EDP class (L4). Once they passed their diagnostics they moved into EDP (L5). They took a twice-weekly Study Center math class and a six-week Introduction to Computers class. Minimally, most L4 students were involved in such activities from four to eight hours a week besides eight hours of class time. The L5 class met for three-hour sessions four days a week. The Study Center staff scheduled blocks of EDP computer time for Friday. Typically these students were involved in Study Center activities for eight to ten hours a week.

The ideal EDP candidate should possess basic skills evaluated at the 8th grade level. My students, as in many ABE and ESOL programs, covered a range of levels. Some had completed Bacc II in Haiti (equivalent to 14 years of U.S. education) but had no opportunity to take their final exams. A few had passed the exams but did not have the final certificate. Most had not attended school beyond the equivalent of the U.S. 8th grade. Two of my best students had no formal education past the fourth grade but both earned diplomas and went on to college, one to RCC and the other to UMASS/Boston.

Our intake counselor did not use any special EDP assessment test. All students took an in-house test, were interviewed, and were placed according to existing criteria. Four to six weeks after students were placed in L4, I would talk to them about their education goals and class work to develop an Individual Education Plan. As part of the mid-term student evaluation process, I would administer a short cloze test similar to the EDP reading diagnostic (the Degrees of Reading Power test, or DRP). Using their test results, initial intake information, class work and Study Center math evaluation, we would estimate when they might be ready for official BPS testing.

The L4 and L5 classes were separate and distinct only insofar as the L5 students had officially passed all the diagnostics; there was, however, what I would call instructional integration. The EDP task assignments provided an instructional framework for both levels with the emphasis on reading and writing, with reading leading the writing. Good skills in these areas will serve students well whether they are taking EDP diagnostics, college placement tests and exams, or writing research papers.

I believe that students should understand not only what they are learning but why they are learning it and how to take this knowledge and apply it in various learning situations. I also believe they need to write logically, using detail and description, and show less reliance on personal opinion to form the basis of their arguments. Well-written essays develop from interesting ideas that are worth pursuing on paper. It doesn't matter whether the essay is for the GED writing test, or for the EDP cultural background requirement, or for a classroom composition assignment. My experience

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has been that using a recipe-like process stunts the growth of novice writers. A sequential building block approach has not worked in my classroom. Believing that students can't write an essay unless they have studied and mastered sentences and then paragraphs keeps textbook publishers in business. Fill-in-the-blank exercises designed to provide practice finding the main idea are about as valuable as giving students lists of transition words that can be incorporated into essays. I know these things because I have tried all of the above, to little avail. This seems especially true for students who have not had at least ten years of education or have not learned and internalized these things as children. My instructional philosophy was: The only way to learn to write is to write. And we did a lot of reading so we'd have something to write about. In both levels grammar and construction remained an on-going problem but that's why writers have editors and students have instructors. We handled these problems while revising and in final editing workshops—usually in front of the computer. Was I always comfortable doing it this way? No. Did I feel as if I could have done more? Of course.

Writing Essays on Cultural Background and Family Culture

To begin the cultural background essay (option 1) in Task V we always brainstormed as a whole class. Students are asked to write a 300-word essay describing an aspect of their culture. As individuals we all take our cultures for granted; what may look unique to the outsider is often a commonplace ritual of everyday living to insiders. I wanted to be very careful that I did not impose my ideas or pre-conceived cultural notions on them. For that reason, I began by posing a general question, then acted as recorder and nudged only when students got off track or stale. We started with a question: What is special or different about living in Haiti compared with living in the US? Easy question and bound to elicit broad and general responses like music, the government, vodun, religion, transportation, the provinces. Narrowing down took time but asking them to tell me more using a series of questions helped. One student started thinking about the political system and ended up writing about transportation. Tap-taps are privately owned vehicles, actually brightly painted minibuses covered with spiritual messages, providing public transportation. With music blaring, drivers speed through the streets, vehicles overflowing with passengers. "Riding tap-taps can be like a party," he said. This statement became his topic sentence. I had practically no input into the process; I merely took notes while students talked about riding tap-taps.

We didn't brainstorm prior to writing the Family Culture essay, also from Task V. In L4 we'd had many discussions centering on family and societal values. We had studied the organization of the Ibo family characterized in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the impact of colonialism on indigenous culture. For the EDP assignment, students initially chose to write about the differences between American and Haitian families. Inevitably students characterized Haitian families as close and loving while American families were distant and parents exercised little supervision over their children. They described wonderful Haitian families and awful American families. Unfortunately, these papers were opinion. When questioned, students admitted their information came mainly from television and what they consider the negative behavior displayed by their children who are influenced by American school friends. I certainly do not want to force my students to criticize their values and beliefs, but I do want them to look critically at culture and the belief systems that influence and shape values and behavior. We started with a set of questions designed to elicit information on their families:

- Who is in your family?
- Describe where you grew up.
- What type of house did you live in?
- Any siblings?
- Describe the responsibilities of each family member.

I met with each student and used this background to determine how to proceed with the paper. I made three suggestions: 1) Interview an American and write a contrast/comparison paper on Haitian and American families; 2) Discuss the change in roles and responsibilities individual family members may have undergone after moving to this country; and 3) Explore the differences between the way you were raised in Haiti and the way you are raising your children here.

One student stumbled upon her starting point after class one day. She was waiting for her husband to pick her up after he had taken their 13-year-old son to the barber shop. When they walked in, she immediately went to the boy and inspected his haircut. She was obviously very upset with her husband and began speaking in Kreyol. All I caught was that the boy looked like a little American. When she said this, she quickly looked at me and tried to explain what she meant. The gist of our conversation was that she worried about her son being influenced negatively by American culture, particularly Black American culture. The proof of this was his new haircut with two arced slices cut on the right side. She wanted to be somewhat freer with her children than her parents had been with her, but not so free that there was a danger they'd grow up out of control. She felt torn and con-

fused because she herself had gotten married at sixteen to escape what she considered an unduly strict upbringing. I suggested she consider this as an essay topic. It was not easy for her to write critically about her upbringing, but she persevered and wrote an excellent essay expressing this dilemma. First draft to final version took five months.

Writing Critiques: A Live Performance

Other pieces of substantial writing were the critiques in Task I. Students are required to visit a museum or art exhibit and to attend a live performance and then write a 100-word critique for both, answering at least three of the following six questions:

1. What was your overall impression of the performance/exhibit?
2. What part did you enjoy the most? Why?
3. What part did you enjoy the least? Why?
4. Would you recommend the performance/exhibit to others? Why or why not?
5. What type of people do you think would be most likely to enjoy this?
6. What type of people do you think would be least likely to enjoy this?

All my students regularly attend Haitian performances at the Strand Theater and in the past we've taken field trips to museums. Their subsequent essays were descriptive but not critical. They wrote sentence after sentence describing the colors in a painting, the frame and where it hung. They took great care to describe the clothing worn by a musical group, the instruments that were played and who'd accompanied them to the performance. They concluded that it was a good experience because they'd learned something or because they'd enjoyed themselves.

The morning after students attended a musical performance at the Strand, I listened closely as they talked to each other. I sat with them as they complained that the musicians were habitually late and how annoying that was especially since the tickets were not cheap. (On this night the group had walked off the stage mid-performance because of a dispute over money.) Then they began to argue about the quality of the performance. Apparently the popularity of this group was on the wane because of their unsatisfying live performances and their temperament. I was ecstatic! This is exactly the sort of thing they needed to get on paper. But how to do it? It occurred to me that the EDP questions, in this case, were so general that they limited creativity. They did not help students meaningfully express what they found interesting and enjoyable about the performance they attended.

First I threw out the EDP questions, then I asked myself: Why do people attend concerts or exhibits? For entertainment, sure. To broaden their horizons, maybe. But it seemed to me that there was more going on with my students and the Strand shows. They were perfectly happy to attend the live performances I suggested but clearly they preferred to go to the Strand and I needed to find out why. So I attended a concert with them. We saw a magnificent singer named Farrah Juste. The atmosphere in the theater was electric; there was an air of expectation in the audience. People were dressed up, the men in suits and ties, the women in semi-formal dresses. There was movement: people socializing, seeing and being seen, greeting friends and relatives. When Ms. Juste walked onstage, barefoot in a flowing dress, it didn't matter that the show started an hour late, the audience roared their approval at her appearance. Although I don't speak Kreyol, there was no way to miss the communication between the artist and the audience. Her music was topical in nature. She sang about the beauty of the island and its people, life in the countryside, the corrupt government, and the longing Haitians in the diaspora feel for their country.

Attending the concert was a very smart thing for me to do. I saw students respond to their culture and their history; they knew the artist, understood the message and therefore had an opinion. Students just needed new questions to answer so I came up with these:

- Who is the artist?
- Does the artist move you or leave you indifferent?
- How does his/her music make you feel?
- Is there a message in the lyrics and music beyond just entertainment? What is it?
- Do the costumes and movement enhance the performance?
- Are you reminded of anything else by the performance?

I put the questions on the board and asked that they describe the performance to me. The entire concert was in Kreyol, not English, so I needed a translation of the lyrics and an explanation of the interaction between the audience and Ms. Juste. Using the questions and their memory they began to write. For students who had trouble writing I would sit with them and they'd dictate their story of the concert. Now I could ask specific questions because I'd been there. One of Ms. Juste's songs brought tears to the eyes of one student. It was a slow song, she told me, describing life in the provinces. She cried because the song reminded her of her own childhood and her fear that she would never see Haiti again. Another song brought the audience to their feet as they sang with the musicians. This, it turned out, was

the group's theme song, chronicling the events leading up to the historic slave revolt freeing the island from French control.

These essays were wonderful. Students did not limit themselves to a description of the performance. Some included background on the musicians; others described the political nature of the music and its importance in the struggle for freedom and democracy in their country. Some wrote poignantly about the way the music triggered memories of life in Haiti. A few described the role concerts play in bringing together the Haitian community in the United States.

Writing Critiques: An Art Exhibit

Dillaway-Thomas House, the oldest residence in Roxbury, is a lovely restored building that functions perfectly as a gallery for exhibits by local artists. I called Renita Martin, the Director, to find out what was being shown. The work of a young, Black woman artist was on display. Her personal and professional life was influenced by the Yoruban belief in ancestor worship. Her work included textiles, sculpture and spirit dolls. A videotape of the artist discussing the influence of her spiritual beliefs on her work was available for viewing. The tape was made in her studio so there was the opportunity to see additional pieces of her work. Before visiting, the class read a newspaper review and we spent time talking informally about art and what we might see at this exhibit. Generally they thought of museum paintings as real art and a few could name one or two famous European painters, but none could think of any Haitian artists. They were rather dismissive when I suggested that art was not the sole property of the elite and that an artist did not have to be dead for hundreds of years before he or she could be appreciated.

Renita opened up early for us so that we could wander around undisturbed by other patrons. I told students not to bring any notebooks or pencils with them; that they could start by watching as much or as little of the interview tape as they liked, then look at the pieces. Almost immediately they gathered around the spirit dolls made of wood and decorated with shells, beads, feathers, human hair.

The dolls are used to call on the spirits of the departed much like the vodun priests call on the lwas, or spirits, during ceremonies. These dolls serve as spiritual and physical bridges to the ancestors.

Students appreciated the artist's reverence for old people and her belief that the spirits of a family remain accessible to living believers after their bodies have died. Students were talking to each other about the choice of materials used, about who or what the dolls might represent.

Several of them recalled "Dead Man's Path," an Achebe short story chronicling a clash over a footpath running through a school compound to the village's ancient burial ground. The conflict was between "unprogressive" villagers "suffering" from pagan, pre-Christian beliefs and a "progressive" schoolmaster "freed from the yoke of his backward culture" by his conversion to Christianity. The footpath in question is used by the old ones to travel between the world of the living and the world of the dead when necessary. Again, we used culture to find a starting point for writing. They were talking to each other about the art and its relevance to them rather than taking notes describing colors or picture frames. Back in the classroom the next day I asked them to write what they remembered from the exhibit. This time I did not put guiding questions on the board; instead I asked them to free write because I wanted them to capture their spontaneous thoughts on paper.

Conclusion

In each instance, students began writing after finding personal meaning in the assignment; finding a connection between the academic and their own reality. Naturally we used a variety of activities—group and individual brainstorming, previous writing, question prompts, videos, discussion, novels, short stories, and newspapers (nothing new here)—but these alone don't make for good writing. In fact, it appears there is a combination of circumstances that contribute to good writing.

I have four rules I follow to help students in finding starting points: 1) A willingness to take charge in a classroom by providing students with interesting and challenging material that stimulates and stirs ideas. 2) Recognizing that reading and writing reinforce each other and should always be taught simultaneously. 3) Taking the time to listen to what students have to say about themselves and their lives. Identifying the right prompt questions, whether general or specific, is a direct result of understanding what students know and what they think about a particular subject. 4)Acknowledging that no single writing approach works for everybody. Discovering how best to help individual students improve their writing requires experimentation and time but it is well worth the effort. •

Writing Essays: A Frustrating Experience for Bilingual Students

Kerline Auguste Tofuri

I teach ESOL Level III and the External Diploma Program (EDP) at the Haitian Multi-Service Center. For my first two years I taught ESOL I and II. More recently, I took on Level III and the EDP classes. The majority of my students come from Haiti, as I do. The students range in age from thirty to fifty years old, and they come from different socio-economic backgrounds. In our country, going to school is a luxury that only a small portion of the population can afford. The school system is very different in Haiti as compared to the United States. Teachers have total control of their classrooms in Haiti, while here the students have some input on what they think would help them learn better. We hope that many more of the adult population will have an opportunity to go to school, and overcome their fear of being ridiculed by those who think they can't make it. My students and I agree that age, money, class or color should not stop a person from striving to have a better way of living. We firmly believe that the key to success is through education. So together, we are trying to improve our reading and writing skills as speakers of English as a second language. By knowing how to write and read better, we will be able to fit into the American society. Some of us will go on to college, attend a trade program, or find a better job. Most of all, we can be more productive members of our family and community because we are better equipped educationally.

The Difficulty of Writing Essays

My students, from ESOL Level III, the Pre-EDP, and the EDP, practice free writing by keeping a daily journal. Before they write about a topic, we often have class discussions about the way we want to approach how to write an essay. We use newspaper articles, textbooks, and real-life stories to choose topics. It is almost too easy for many of them to write about narratives. They like to write about their family, jobs, and daily activities, because they often have a lot to say about themselves and no research is required. They can easily write five or six sentences. When they write about home and family experiences, that kind of writing doesn't demand new ideas or an explanation of a foreign idea. They do not struggle over what to say. When they have to write an essay that is not of a personal nature, but on a controversial topic, many of them get frustrated. Frustration tends to set in when students have to deal with unfamiliar topics.

Failing the diagnostic tests for the External Diploma Program is a very frustrating experience for my EDP students and me. The students are frustrated because some of them want to complete the program and go to a community college or a training program. They feel like they don't have enough time to practice writing at home, and they are aware that they can't write a very good essay as it is required by the program. It is difficult for the students to have to wait for another three months to retake the writing test each time they fail. We have been practicing for months on different ways to choose a topic and devising good techniques for writing a two-paragraph essay. Below is a sample of writing by a student who did not pass the writing diagnostic because of errors in sentence structure, punctuation and spelling:

The Importance of My dad

Life in general is something very special. to talk about it, it would take me more than one day. Instead of talking about life in general, I will talk about a part of my personal life. My childhood was not as exuberant as many as my peers. My father

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died when I was five years old. After his death, I had no exposure to what other children experience as father's love. At that age I was not even mature enough to recognize the absence of my father.

When I was twelve years old, I began to realize that something or someone was missing out of my life. I quickly realised it was the presence of my father and I learned no one could ever replace him. It is very unfortunate for any child to grow up without a father, and I wish to be there for my children. I would hate to see them growing without my love! I wish for my children to be happy because I know if my father was alive, he would also like for me to be happy. I love my father with all my heart, and I will always miss him.

For my ESOL III students, when they write their first draft of an essay, I instruct them not to worry about the fundamentals of writing as much as the content of the essay. My motivation is to have them get as many thoughts down on paper as possible before talking about the structure of writing an essay. This way of teaching writing allows my students to think and ask questions about their topics. They learn how to take notes, share their ideas, and most importantly, they are able to communicate among themselves and work together as a group. I feel successful when my students are able to help each other in spelling, rewording a sentence, or solving a problem that one of the group has difficulty dealing with.

As the instructor, I sometimes feel helpless repeating over and over certain things that I have already discussed in class. When I first started teaching the EDP class, I noticed that some of the students had difficulty differentiating a topic from a topic sentence. They also had trouble taking good notes before they started their writing, and putting their thoughts together in a coherent pattern. That's when I decided to invite a consultant to meet with me and my students.

Trying a New Approach

I decided to get help from Lenore Balliro, a consultant from the Adult Literacy Resource Institute. The intent was to revive the classroom atmosphere, evaluate the students' progress, and especially to better prepare the students for the External Diploma Program diagnostic writing test. Lenore and I met for four hours, talking about the External Diploma Program and what is expected from the students. We exchanged some of the students' writings and discussed what I hoped to accomplish after the writing sessions. After several discussions with Lenore, we decided to hold special writing sessions with the students. Lenore would come to the class and work with the students for a few hours, introducing new techniques to develop topic sentences and two paragraph essays. We had our first session as a group on writing a good essay according to the rules of the External Diploma Program. We practiced one specific way to write a two-paragraph essay. Later, the students were asked to choose their own topic and to write one clear topic sentence for each paragraph and five or more sentences to support each topic sentence.

During the first session, the topic was to write an essay about an unhappy moment. For the second session, the students were asked to work on their own on a similar topic, or to write about a pleasurable moment in their lives, by taking notes before they wrote their first draft. We also discussed and worked on some of the controversial issues. The reason for that was to help the students learn how to take sides on certain issues that they agree or disagree with. Some of the topics were: distribution of condoms in school, prayer in school, and cancellation of bilingual education. The last day, Lenore and I worked individually or in a small group with the students on their drafts to discuss structure, style, and grammar. The workshops had a positive influence on the students' writing skills. Now, each of them can make a distinction between a topic and a topic sentence. However, alone the workshops were not enough to ease all of their frustrations.

The time from the first to the final draft of an essay is often a long and drawn out process for my students and me. After the students turn in their first draft, I meet with each of them at the computer room to go over their revisions. At this point, I only ask them questions on their ideas to make sure they are clear on what they want to write about. At the computer room the students begin to make changes to their first drafts.

After revising the initial draft, some of my students feel frustrated about the number of corrections made on grammar and style. Sometimes they choose to pick another topic to write about rather than continue with their previous draft. I do not encourage them to give up and start over, but to work harder at completing their original essay. The following is an excerpt from a student's essay:

Haitian families have always believed or differed: education from instruction. Saying that instruction is includes whatever happens to knowledge like: Math, grammar, science, read or write is taught at school by teachers. And education is good habits and behavior, training received from parents and grand parents at home as family bacground.

Another important concept I try and educate my students on is not to assume they are writing just for their teacher or themselves, but to a diverse audience. By remembering this their writing is not limited and they pay more attention to details. This attention to details also teaches them how to better structure their essays and support their statements. Below is a sample of that style of writing from one of my students:

> *The "Good Friday" is the last day of the Lent time, the 38th day after "Ash Wednesday." The religious event is fully celebrated by all the nation because Christian and non-Christian celebrate this day which is a holiday for everyone.*

That was the original version of the first draft; the following is the revised excerpt:

> *Good Friday is the last day of the Lent time, the 38 day after Ash Wednesday. In Haiti, Good Friday is celebrated by everyone of all religious creed, Christians and non-Christians alike.*

Essay writing is a difficult process for both the students and myself. It is difficult for me as a teacher because I have to force the students to continue revising their writing until they get it right. My EDP students are sometimes reluctant to continue making changes to their drafts. They are not reluctant because they are lazy or resentful, but because of time and language barriers. They want to make their writing perfect, but it becomes a struggle sometimes due to the language barrier. When they try to rephrase or add new ideas to their writing, so much can go wrong between the translations. It also becomes difficult when their own judgements get discounted because of differing expectations and ideas of the EDP staff. It becomes so they are not writing for themselves, but to meet the expectations of others. It takes a lot of patience, different teaching styles, and hard work to accommodate the needs of all the students. But in the end my encouragement and guidance help the students persevere and become better writers. It is rewarding as a teacher to see the improvement in my students' writing in the final draft of their essays. (See the essays by two of my students included here on next pages).

What Have I Learned?

Once I started teaching EDP, I realized how important writing is. Preparing students at lower levels is important to later development in writing, so I made some changes in my curriculum. Instead of only writing in answers to comprehension questions, I introduced journal writing. I became more demanding and held higher expectations for my ESOL III students. Every class I require my students to write in their journals. Grammar and structure are not stressed at that point, but reviewed and revised at a later date. The purpose of journals is to get the students in the habit of writing and putting down their thoughts on paper.

Although students generally are not taught essay writing until they reach ESOL Level III or IV, I think it is important for teachers in ESOL I and II to stress the basic writing skills needed for good essay writing, even though students do not write as much or as well at this level. The teachers' curriculum might include sessions on journal writing, writing topic sentences, and group discussions on essay writing. This is not always easy for the teachers, because the students do not progress at the same pace. Sometimes students must be dealt with on an individual basis and given the opportunity to advance at their own speed. From my experience in teaching writing to ESOL and EDP students at different levels, I've learned that sometimes the curriculum has to be changed or modified to meet the needs of all students. This requires patience on the part of the students and the teacher. Writing English is not an easy process for a student from a foreign country. For both students and teachers to succeed, it takes a coherently structured program from beginning to end. •

Family Culture
by Leonie

The world is made of families, but the word "family" does not have the same meaning in every culture. For example, in the American society, you hear about a single parent who is a man or a woman raising one or several children, a guardian who is raising somebody else's child or children, a foster parent who is raising another family's child or children, or a family who has decided for multiple reasons to adopt someone's child or children.

In my culture, the word "family" has also different meanings, but a typical family includes the mother, the father, and the children. I grew up in Haiti in a family of five children. My dad was the head of the family. At a very young age, my father taught us a good sense of responsibility by assigning tasks to each one of us. He also expected us to be obedient and respectful. My mom helped us with our school asignments. She disciplined us by spanking when we did not behave well. Love and discipline were the main things that my folks loved to teach us. I remember my mom spanked me, because after school I went to a friends' house without prior permission from her.

The cooperative spirit was also well taught among us. The elders in the family had to help the young ones. I recall that when I was eight years old, I would get up in the morning to help my mother dress my baby brother for school.

For one thing, in Haiti, parents have clear authority over their minors. They can use any kind of disciplinary action when their children do not behave properly. As long as parents do not physically harm their children, I strongly believe that they have the right to disipline their children the way it pleases them. The Haitian Government does not interfere in family affairs. In fact, in Haiti, there are no laws protecting children. I do not believe that is a very good thing for the parents and the children.

In the U.S, parents cannot freely discipline their children. For example, spanking a child is a type of physical abuse. The government establishes laws which protect children from all forms of abuse. I am raising my children in this country without troubles, because I know my limitations. I try to use a lot of patience; you need it with children. I often think of my childhood; I remember that when my mom spanked me, I cried and felt as if I didn't love her. Now, I realize it did me good. Growing up, I had enough discipline to make my way through life. I understand that children should have certain freedom, but, they should learn about their limitations. In the U.S, because children feel protected by laws, they tend not to obey or to listen to their parents. This is not true of all children. Some children follow their parents' recommendations and they do well through childhood until adulthood. It is not bad to have laws to protect the children, because there are so many careless parents who may harm their children. In a harmful situation, the government must interverne. Although I am against any breaking up of families, when things are becoming critical, some strict measures should be taken. For example, when parents abandon their children, the government has the right to interfere. On the other hand, parents who choose to discipline their children by spanking should not feel threatened for doing so. As a Haitian parent, I have the right to discipline my children the way I think is best for them, the society, and myself.

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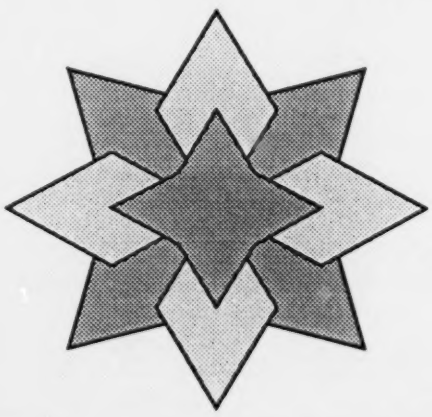
Family Culture
by Jean Claude Saint-Dic

In general, family always has been considered as a father, a mother, and children. Though sometimes, people in a particular group, for example at church, friends at school, and at a workplace is considered as family. The relationship that they have can give each person in the group a sense of belonging. They are no longer different, they have become family. They share the same feelings, needs, wants and enjoyment. Likewise, when the father is not there, the mother is uncomfortable or the children are uneasy. The absence of one member stands in the mind of the others of the group until the absentee appears or calls to let them know that he/she is fine or preoccupied by an emergency.

In my family, there are seven people: my father, my mother and five children. Sometimes, my parents welcomed and lodged relatives and strangers. My father was a carpenter, and my mother a dressmaker, and a sales person. When we were small, my mother stayed home to work and sell her merchandise in the neighborhood. At the same time, she took care and watched over us. My father labored out in carpentry; he helped at home too when he was there. I remember, I learned to sweep from him, because I liked the way he held the broom with one hand which was different from my mother and from people in the neighborhood. Haitian brooms are different from and heavier than American brooms, so, to sweep one has to hold a broom with two hands. When we were growing up, the responsibilities were shared: the big choices were for my parents, and the small ones for us.



My older sister was ten; she used to take care of us like our father and mother. She went to the open market, shopped for food and cooked for the whole family. She also made the bed, and set up the furnitures. I washed the dishes, swept the house, and played with my younger brothers and sister.

Haitian families have always made a difference betweeen education and instruction. They believe that instruction includes learning or knowledge in math, grammmar, science, reading, and writing. People particularly go to school to learn these subjects. On the other hand, good manners received from parents and grandparents at home, and good family traditions are considered like educational values. Therefore, my parents were strict; my mother was more severe than my father. When he brought toys that could lead us to be in contact with children who had bad behavior, she threw the toys away. Sometimes, we used to call her "Tonton Makout", in her absence of course; because we felt that she was too picky, though we loved her. She did not want us to copy the bad behavior of any child. She was a Christian. She made sure that we prayed together before we went to sleep at night. We also prayed when we woke up in the morning. I think she did a great ob.

In comparison to what I've seen in the U.S., I understand that the concept of family has the same meaning as in Haiti. Like Haitian parents, some American parents do care about raising nice children. American parents don't have the same opportunitites that we have in Haiti. In Haiti, parents have full control over their children, even the neighbors help to watch over them. The Department of Social Service in the U.S. arrests parents or takes children away from parents. In Haiti, the authorities beat or blame delinquent youths who disrespect their parents or any adults. Another problem is, there are too many bad shows on T.V. and children imitate them. In Haiti, some parents don't allow their children to watch all those evil things on TV.

In conclusion, I must say that the concept of family varies has different meanings in different culture. I am proud to be Haitian because family is very important in my culture. My parents did their best to raise their children. They wanted for their children to have a good education. I want to do the same for my family.

Finding Ways "Not To Teach"

Xiaowei He

At first blush, it may seem curious and incongruous in a publication of an institution dedicating itself to the undertaking of adult basic education to have an essay on *finding ways "not to teach."* It appears, after all, contradictory to the nature of the enterprise. The two reasons that nevertheless justify my initial impulse for wishing to write this essay are: (1) that I realize having students focus too much on heavily-loaded prescribed content turns them—and myself—off; and (2) that I find it very difficult, if not absolutely impossible, to conduct an effective instructional session by informing students without interesting them.

I have always felt mysterious about the meaning and the conceptual complexity of the word "to teach," beyond the notions of "to instruct, to instill, to lecture, to train, to coach, to drill, to impart, to inform, to assign, to test, and to question." To me, "to teach," in a certain sense, might well mean *"not to teach"* (if I may say so!)—to make the class enjoyable and relaxing, that is.

In the teaching and learning interaction, it is not easy to pinpoint or lay bare exactly where and how a teacher should modify his/her way of teaching in order to make the class enjoyable and relaxing. A proper sensitivity to how students react and respond, however, can provide a perspective for the enrichment of class instruction and communication with students. One thing that I personally find very necessary to do in class is, on some occasions, to spend some time with students talking about and laughing at some casual, less significant, yet interesting things in addition to those that are important and serious, since enjoyment and relaxation are accompanied by changes in the way we feel, think, and act.

One instance I have been enjoying the memory of is one afternoon when I entered the classroom feeling ready to teach, only to find myself in the midst of an outburst of laughter. It was my newly-cut hair which students found funny. I realized at that point a change of look brought students a new state of mind, and the same could be true if I chose to do things differently from what I normally would have done when I taught a class. I put down the textbook and spent the time talking with the class about hair, hair styles, and colors of hair. As our conversation went along, I found that a few students were jotting down things that we talked about. This made me see light on the fact that what the class was engaged in was not merely a conversation activity; it was also a successful pre-writing activity in which students observed, thought, talked, explored, and listed. Why not have them think and talk on paper? The writing activity that followed was exhilarating. It was like a toy block building project in which students—like builders—were mapping, fixing, and translating their thoughts and ideas into sentences and paragraphs on the page. Some were busily thumbing through dictionaries, while others were yelling for help with words. It was a session of relaxed conversation, meaningful communication (both verbal and non-verbal), and lots of laughter. Many months later when I had an incidental talk with a student from that class, she told me she still remembered exactly what we did in that particular session and reminded me that I needed to go for a new haircut.

At another training session that I spent with a group of TAG peer tutors, we watched the movie *Dim Sum*, a story about a sixty-ish Chinese woman and her daughter as immigrants, their strong yet concealed views on life and marriage, and the bittersweet aches and the harsh consequences of being sandwiched in between two cultures. I planned to have the tutor trainees first watch the movie and then compare their

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own life experiences as new immigrants with those in the movie. But as we watched the movie, I noticed that the slow, heavily-plotted, and contrived development of the story bored the tutors. I figured that they would fall asleep before the movie could end. I immediately stopped the tape when the movie showed a scene in which the daughter was in conflict with the mother on such issues as life, family, marriage, filial obedience, and traditions. I listed those issues on the chalkboard and asked tutors to choose one issue which they felt most interested them. One tutor suggested that we talk about the issue of marriage, and the rest all agreed. Then we began our discussion. Much to my surprise and amusement, the quiet and stifling session suddenly turned into a hilarity of discussing, expressing, deliberating, and arguing. We kidded about the movie, bantered with each other, and laughed at ourselves. The issue for discussion at that moment was like an enigma waiting to be interpreted and explicated. Every member in the group became an active interpreter, making meaning out of the issue by associating it with her/his personal experience, knowledge, values, beliefs, propensities, and attitudes. One elder tutor even criticized me for being not married and seriously advised that I marry myself off.

I had once been making efforts to search for effective teaching techniques before I came to realize that there are no ready-made ones which a teacher can make use of in all situations with confidence. It is in the nature of things inefficacious, if not unhelpful, to conceptualize and generalize any particular type of teaching utilities or techniques in isolation. When we teach, we are dealing with human subjects whose effectiveness in learning does not only attribute to a teacher's approach or style, but also relates, to a great extent, to a multiplicity of factors like students' personal background, experience, ability, as well as temperament and personality. I do find, however, that creating an atmosphere in which students are able to relax and laugh while they learn is a good teaching activity. I am aware that there is a practical limit to relaxing and having fun in the classroom, since it is not an end in itself. It can be, however, a means to an end. I had once been wrestling with the issue of whether it is ethically correct to kid and joke in the classroom. Now I find that it is precisely this which enables students—and myself, for that matter—to get to more important and significant activities or issues. Besides, when it comes to a situation in which "to teach" means "to hypnotize," I can hardly imagine anything better than finding ways "not to teach." •

Women's History Month: Studying Women Through Biography

Martha Gray

I teach the ABE and Pre-ASE (Adult Secondary Education) classes in the Career Development Services Department at Dimock Community Health Center in the Roxbury section of Boston. In these classes I make reading, writing and math the core of the curriculum, because the students (mostly women) who place into these classes will need a strong foundation in these subjects in order to continue to reach their individual educational and social goals. Although every student in these classes begins her/his course of study with a high level of motivation, often this motivation wanes in the face of child care crises, illness, family responsibilities, and the increasing challenge of the class work.

I began to realize that a project of major proportion might provide some badly needed energy and increase the incentive to attend class on a regular basis. With Women's History Month in the near future, I mentioned my interest to Martha Merson at the A.L.R.I. I knew that I wanted to develop an integrated reading and writing curriculum that would be of high interest, one that would broaden the students' understanding of the world around them and give them an opportunity to do some research, using the resources of our local library. I also was keenly aware of the need to engage my students in a project that would energize them and provide some extra incentive to attend class. I was in search of a curriculum that would excite my students, unleashing some pathos and passion that could be a vehicle to improving their reading and writing skills.

With Martha's input I designed a general format. Every student would read either a biography or an autobiography of a woman and write a report on her, and then as a group the students would create a paper patchwork quilt with each student designing a square depicting the woman she had read about.

Reading About Women

First I contacted the local branch librarian and had several discussions with her regarding the project. I shared my hope that our completed written and artistic work could be displayed at the library. The librarian's response was enthusiastic and we made a plan to have each of the classes spend a morning at the library. The librarian would explain the layout of the library, familiarize the students with the many uses of the computer, introduce students to a wide array of biographies and autobiographies at their various reading levels, and help students obtain library cards. Unfortunately, due to the librarian's schedule and responsibilities it was not possible for the classes to visit the library at the outset of the project. Rather than serve as an introduction, the visits to the library had to be scheduled for several weeks into the project. Given this situation I had to alter the approach to the subject material. Instead of immediately jumping into reading individual books, I had the class read a series of short pieces about a variety of women of the past and present. These short readings gave the students the opportunity to compare and contrast the times, challenges, and accomplishments of a variety of women. It also gave the students practice in answering questions, drawing inferences and offering opinions about biographies and autobiographies. These readings elicited lots of personal stories from the students which were shared in conversation as well as during writing, for the readings acted as a catalyst for students to write about their own trials and travails, to give voice to their own histories.

The visits to the library were our first group outings. Since the library was so very close to our school, we walked. It was fascinating for me to see my students outside of the context of the classroom, in an environment more familiar to them. For the first class visit, on

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the way to and from the library students were animated. Here on the neighborhood street the students were the leaders, with the teacher as companion. The students talked among themselves, clustering in small groups. Some of them interacted with other people on the street. Many students exhibited an energy and a confidence that I did not always see during class time. However, when we reached the library, the easy banter ceased, the body language of comfort and confidence vanished. These strong, opinionated, animated women were suddenly timid and silent. With the librarian they were demur, respectful and extremely shy!

Armed with the experience of the visit to the library with the first class, I discussed the upcoming trip with the second class. I reminded them of their inner strengths, their abilities to converse, the importance of engaging the librarian in dialogue and giving voice to any concerns or questions that they might have related to library services and the Women's History Project. With that said, I was taken aback when the students in the second class acted all too familiar, all too comfortable in the library, with several putting their feet up on the desks, interrupting the librarian during her presentation, demanding rather than requesting her assistance. The trips to the library afforded me the opportunity to interact with my students in the context of the larger world. It was an opportunity that was enlightening and enriching, providing another layer to my understanding of my students.

For the most part students chose books that were appropriate to their reading and interest levels. I asked that students not choose the same woman so that the classes could have as wide a sampling of personalities as possible. Only two of the students had difficulty finding a book that they liked. It so happened that both of these students are Latinas and they both voiced a desire to read about a Latina woman. By the end of the library visit one of the students decided to pursue her interest in the supernatural and she selected a biography about sisters who were involved in spiritualism and talking to ghosts. The report she wrote is included here—"The Girls Who Talked to Ghost" by M.N. The other student opted to continue the search at her local branch library because she didn't like any of the offerings on hand. However, when this student next came to class, she had only a sketchy computer printout on a Latina singer. Realizing that she could not possibly answer the list of questions, she opted to find another biography. Finally she settled on a book that her nephew had at home, one that had to be returned to the library before she completed the project in its entirety.

Writing About Women's Lives

For their initial assignment (over the course of a weekend), I asked students to read the first chapter of their books. I thought this would be a wonderful way for students to decide if they had chosen a book of interest and a book that was appropriate to their reading level. At the next class session I passed out a sheet that listed fourteen questions that I wanted students to answer as they read their particular book. I designed the questions with the hope that they would help focus the students' reading, enabling them to gather pertinent information as well as draw inferences about their subject's life. (The questions are adapted from Kate Carney's workshop handouts on developing an historical character.) I posed the questions so students would answer in the first person. This gave us the opportunity to talk about writing in different voices. I also thought it would give the students the chance to more fully enter into the life of the woman they were reading about.

1. What is your name?
2. Where do you live?
3. When did you live? What is your birthdate?
4. What is your occupation?
5. What do you like to do with your time?
6. What type of person are you?
7. What makes you angry?
8. What troubles have you had in your life?
9. What are you proud of?
10. What are your desires, your passions?
11. What do you consider to be the accomplishments of your life?
12. Who are the important people in your life?
13. What do you want people to know about you?
14. What do you want people to remember about you?

To help my students grasp the task at hand, I modeled the answers to the questions several times. First, I had the students ask me the questions. I answered each question using my actual life story. Then I took on the persona of one of the women featured in one of the short essays that we had read in the beginning stage of this project. I answered all of the questions by drawing on information that we had all read together. Then I asked students to read each question out loud and make certain that they understood the gist of each query. We talked about the fact that students would have to reread certain parts of the book in order to effectively answer the questions.

Students worked on this project in and out of class. Much of the reading was assigned as homework. Questions were tackled as part of our writing sessions. However, this assignment proved to be almost overwhelming for the majority of the ABE students. They complained that the assignment was too difficult. Stu-

dents could not work on the questions because they were not doing the reading on their own. However, the ABE students did not tell me directly that the reading was either too difficult or too time consuming. Rather they attempted to ferret out the necessary information to answer the questions without actually reading the book!

In contrast, the Pre-ASE students were able to complete the assignment. However, their writing was not nearly as interesting as it had been in other projects. The task of researching information and drawing inferences seemed to drain the students of their previously developed writing abilities. There was a definite lack of energy and captivating description in their reports. Students needed to share information that some other author had already penned. This was an exercise in gathering and digesting details and vignettes, of successfully retelling in personal prose the essence of another's life. It was to be their entry into the domain of research coupled with personal reflection. One student, C.P., did capture in her first draft the spirit of the assignment and of her subject, Zora Neale Hurston (her writing is included here), but she did not stay in the class long enough to revise her draft.

Many students produced a chronological account of the woman's life, but the writing was definitely more a reporting, a dry retelling of particular events, rather than an engaging account of what made the

The Girls Who Talked to Ghost
by M.N.

Kathy Fox (8 years-old) and Margaretta Fox (14-years-old) lived in Hydesville N.Y. They lived in the early 1840 and died in 1893 two months apart from each other. Kathy and Margaretta Fox first started to talked to ghosts in their house in Hydesville N.Y. They couldn't slept at night because of some strange sounds in the night (rappers). After getting to know what was going on they wrote a letter to Leah Fox their oldest sister that lived in Rochester N.Y. Leah Fox went the next day to Hydesville N.Y., she heard the strange sounds. Leah, Kathy, and Margaretta finally talked to the ghost, the ghost retell his story of being murdered and buried in the cellar.

The next day Leah Fox had serious talked wih her mother and sisters, they all found out that if the girls (Kathy and Margaretta) were separated the ghost will go away. Leah returned to Rochester N.Y. and took Kathy with her. On their way to Leah's house they found out that the ghost had follwed them becuase he talked to them.

Leah soon begin the first seances (talking and meeting with the ghosts) in her house, charging $1.00 per person, they soon made a lot of money. Later Margaretta and her mother join Kathy and Leah. Neighbors and others try to burn down their house because they didn't believed in spirits and said that Leah, Kathy and Margareta Fox were demons.

The Fox sisters went to court and past a test based on how they made those noises and how they could talked to the ghost, they past the test because, police and judge couldn't found no evidence that they were faking the sounds and the spirits.

The Fox sisters were proud that they defended their beliefs in spiritualism.

Their passions were to spread spiritualism throughout the world.

The Fox sisters were able to stay alive by Margaretta moving from Rochester, NY to England. Couple of years later Margaretta got married and had a child while living in England.

Her husband died in England soon after their first child was born, Margaretta then returned to NY because she got a message from Kathy. Kathy was very sick.

Kathy later died on July 2, 1892, friends and family arranged for Kathy's burial in a brooklyn cemetery.

Margaretta returned to giving seances, then on Auguest 20, 1892 she declared that she had lied in denouncing spiritualism.

In Septemeber 1892, Margaretta was found unconscious in a shabby apartment, she was taken to the hospital but, hours later she died.

In 1905, Dr. Mellen-who was not a spiritualist told the medico-legal Society of New York about Margaretta's last hours. She said that after Margaretta regained consciousness there were loud raps in the room and that Margaretta whispered in a weak voice "It is my friends watching over me and preparing a place for me."

The Fox sisters wanted people to know and remembered about them that they really could talked to ghost and they didn't fake any of the rappers or the seances and that they survived the hate and demands of people who did not believe in them.

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Book Report
by C.P.

My name is Zora Neale Hurston. I lived in Eatoville, Florida. I was born on Januray 7, 1891. On my own time i like to write books and tell story. Most of them story are folktetles. I have traved many of places like Mobile Alabama where i met the writer Langston Hughes. I got married on May 19, 1927 to Herbert Sheen. But the marriage did not last long only 4 years. Then we got a divorce. Me and my father did not get along at all. But i was close to my mother. I hade a very hot temper and I did not like when people disrespeted and groped at me. I always tough nobody loved me and, I hated to moved around a lot. When i was in New Orleans i studied hoodeo traditional African beliefs. I accomplishment that i finish school. People will always remeber how good of a writer. And that i was genersity and outrageous action. And as well as my hot temper.

particular woman a complex and compelling individual! One student's written report (see A.S.'s essay on Dr. Ellen Ochoa) does not reflect her previous writing style and abilities, nor does it attend to the full list of fourteen questions. I have to surmise that this assignment intimidated this student to the point that she had assistance either from the book itself or perhaps from a well-meaning friend or relative.

In contrast to the reading and writing components, the creation of a group quilt was a stupendous endeavor. For many of the students, it was the first opportunity in a long time for them to test and/or tap into their artistic selves. Students participated in a guided meditation, focusing on the woman they'd read about. Then students were asked to design a quilt square that depicted some aspect of that person. After that, they were asked to think of the commonalities between themselves and their book's subject and to show those aspects in another quilt square. Surrounded by an amazing array of art materials, students experimented with colors, textures, symbols and design. For each class, this art session was a time of laughter, nurturing beauty and discoveries of self. The completed quilt is a powerful and tangible testimony of expanding horizons.

Recommendations/Reflections

In reviewing this project I realize that I assigned way too much in way too little time. It occurs to me that

Women's History Month
by A.S.

In 1990, when Dr. Ellen Ochoa was selected to be an astronaut in NASA's Space Shuttle program. She was born May 10, 1958 in Los Angeles, California, but considers La Mesa, California, to be her hometown. Her mother, Roseanne Ochoa, resides in La Mesa. Roseanne, Ellen mother, who hadn't had a chance to go to college after high school enrolled at San Diego State University the year Ellen was born. Twenty-three years later, after raising four children, Roseanne Ochoa received her bachelor's degree. Ellen took a more direct route. She graduated form Grossmont High School, La Mesa, California in 1975; received a bachelor of science degree in physics from San Diego State University in 1980, a master of science degree and doctorate in electrical engineering from Stanford University in 1981 and 1985. Before her selection for astronaut training Ellen was chief of the intelligent System Technology Branch at the NASA/Amis Research Center at Moffet Field Naval Air Station in Mountain View California. She first applied to NASA 1985, but it wasn't until 1987 that she was became one of the top one hundred candidates out of more than 2000 applicants. Finally in 1990 NASA chose Ellen Ochoa and twenty-two others to begin training at the Johnson Space Center in Houston Texas. She was the first Hispanic female ever chosen to become an astronaut. Ellen hopes to be assigned to a shuttle flight. Dr. Ochoa becaome an astronaut in July 1991. Dr. Ochoa has logged over 484 hours in space. Ellens dreams is to build a space station, which she says is "critical" to human exploration in space, a transportation mode to new frontiers." Dr. Ellen Ochoa continues to prove that opportunities for space exploration are indeed limitless.

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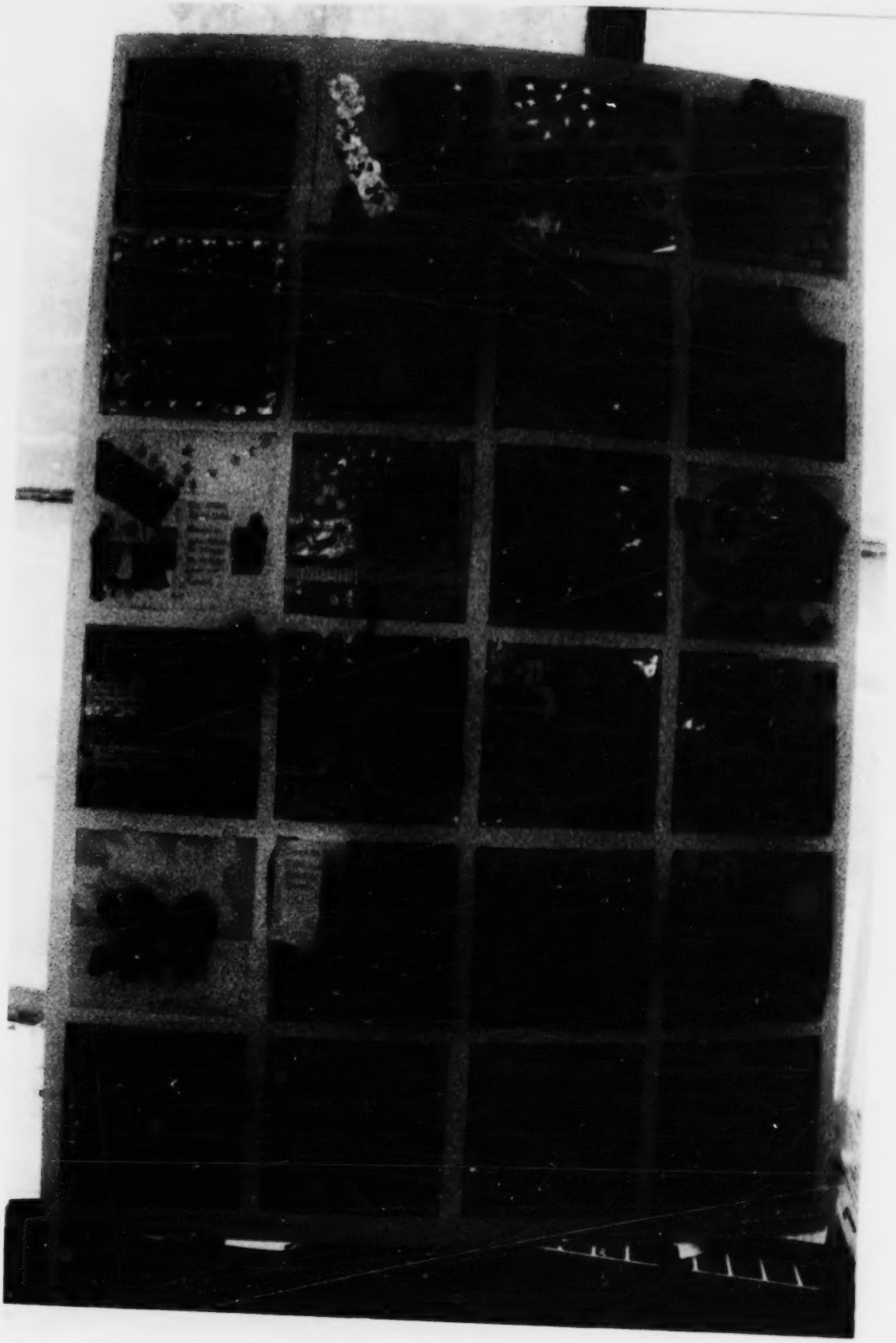

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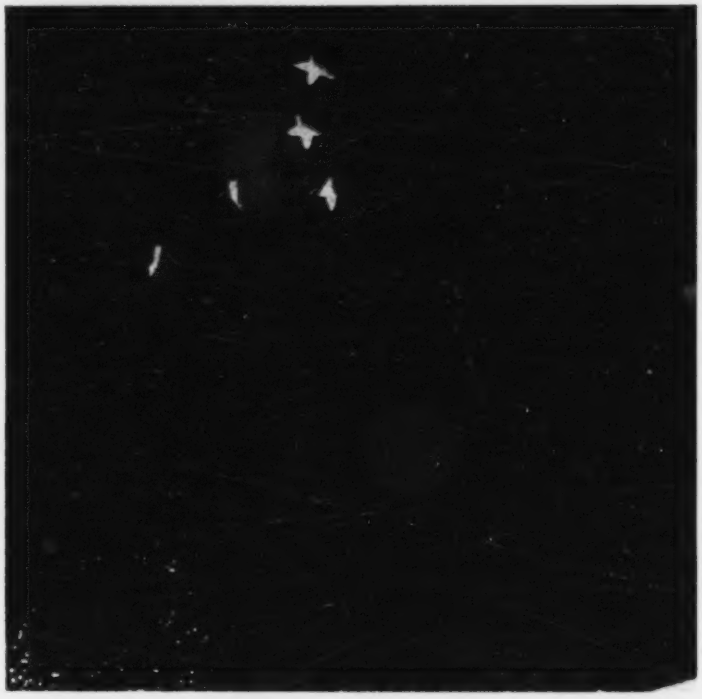
for the ABE students just reading a book in its entirety would have been a sizable goal and an honorable achievement. We could have read one biography together and then divided into smaller working groups to answer and compose responses to questions.

Students in both classes would have benefited from having more time. Each part of the assignment could have been developed more fully, broken down into smaller segments, thereby affording students the opportunity to realize success rather than frustration. Given more time and more insight, I would involve students in the process of generating the list of questions. I would have students answer the questions after they had read a short essay, working together to make sense of the assignment. With this experience, students would be better prepared to ferret out the information from a longer text.



I am left with questions I hope I can explore next year:

1. Will making sure ahead of time that the library we visit has a selection of books on Hispanic women give my Latina students a better chance at success? Will our interest in books of this sort lead to advocacy by the class and a change in the library's collection?

2. How can I capitalize on my students' instincts to scan the text for answers? Their shift into this reading strategy is significant. How can I be sure that it works for them, for their complete understanding of the text rather than toward an incomplete, inaccurate or fragmented understanding?

3. If we do more writing throughout the project, will students be able to enhance their reports? How will we draw on creative writing, such as descriptions of the quilt squares, in an essay?

Nonetheless, I can say with confidence and excitement that the Women's History Month project was a success in the following areas:

1. Students spent time in a library (for many a unique experience). Students who did not have their own library cards did acquire them.

2. Students were exposed to a wide array of exciting and important personalities via biography and reading.

3. Students made comparisons and contrasts among the various women being studied as well as between themselves and the women being studied.

4. Each student created one paper quilt square depicting her subject and another quilt square depicting what she shares in common with this woman. Students then worked together to decide the placement of all the squares.

5. The completed quilt is displayed in the local branch library.

6. Students who completed the project received a great sense of accomplishment.

As a teacher I felt energized by this project's potential and quite invested in its development. However, I experienced tremendous frustration as I witnessed students' difficulties with the tasks set before them. Fully aware of time constraints (the end of the teaching cycle), I attempted to salvage the project even as I realized that it required a lot more time and re-evaluation in order to make major and necessary changes. I look forward to the opportunity to refine this project so that its full potential can be realized. I envision it as a vehicle for empowering students and helping us all to maximize our understanding of the important place that women have in our past, present and future! •

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Bridging the "Information Gap": The Content of Writing

Dilip Dutt

Having had substantial experience in teaching in black high schools and adult education centers in South Africa and in adult education programs for GED, ABE and ESOL in the U.S., I tend to believe that there are as many approaches to teaching writing as probably the number of students in a given class. What I have discovered in the course of a fairly long teaching career is that a one-size-fits-all kind of pedagogical strategy is most unlikely to have a snowball's chance in a hell of sitting well with a given class.

Whether students respond to the approach adopted in class depends very much on the teacher's flexibility and capacity to constantly adapt to the needs of the individual students. Metaphorically speaking, whether a teacher succeeds or fails depends a lot on whether she or he is able to *customize* a menu which fills the bill of her or his students, as opposed to providing only *table d'hôte*.

Arguably, good reading (i.e., background knowledge) is a *sine qua non* for good writing. Reading is quintessentially thinking. It is central to the acquisition of intelligent literacy. Regular reading habits significantly enhance one's ability to develop the theoretical notion of a schema which functions as a framework. When a reader becomes a writer, the framework provides the "slots" which the writer then fills by drawing on information. When writers already possess the information, they draw on their background knowledge. If they don't there is an information gap. It's the teacher's obligation to stimulate the acquisition of new information. For example, a writing assignment on preparing for a formal dinner would be immensely facilitated by prior background knowledge about linens, silverware, goblets, and setting the table. Hence, all kinds of pedagogical approaches designed to bridge learners' "information gap" and augment their background knowledge would appear to be instructionally sound.

With the benefit of such hindsight and brimming over with self-confidence, I walked into my new ESOL class at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge—a new two-nights/week job I landed after virtually all my classes at R.C.C. suddenly vanished into frigid January air.

I got to know my class pretty quickly. There are fifteen students in this diverse class. Of the fifteen, three are Cape Verdean immigrants, six are Haitian immigrants, four are Chinese from mainland China (two of whom are visiting scholars), one is from the Azores, and one is from Portugal. There are some students in the class who have high school diplomas from their native countries, and two have Ph.D.'s from their native countries. Their ages range from twenty to late forties. As is typical, eight out of the fifteen in my class are women.

While they are all nearly fluent speakers of English, they have varying degrees of reading and writing skills. For example, some have low-intermediate writing skills but fairly high-intermediate reading skills. Nevertheless, all of the students are highly motivated to learn the English language for a better living in the U.S.

This article focuses on the writings of nine students: five women and four men. I would characterize their reading and writing abilities as ranging from low- to high-intermediate.

My new students seemed used to expecting writing assignments of not more than a page on descriptive/narrative topics once a week. However, I thought a one-page assignment was not adequate. Consequently, I began a requirement that they write at least two

regular-size pages for their writing assignments. But I was not quite successful in implementing it. Nor was I successful in trying to increase the frequency of their writing assignments from once to twice a week because they complained of their lack of spare time.

The "Information Gap"

My encounter with the new class almost coincided with the commemoration of Black History Month. It occurred to me that it would be both appropriate and exciting to celebrate Black History Month in the new milieu. So I got straight down to weaving a lesson around the civil rights movement in the U.S. and its impact on the life of minorities. With this end in view, I tried to provoke thought and discussion in the class around the importance of the civil rights movement in order to be able to figure out how much background knowledge the students had and whether or not they would be comfortable with a writing assignment on the subject. It was my expectation that the discussion would be productive in the sense that it would help me devise a plan for a writing assignment compatible with the needs of the learners.

However, it soon became apparent as we brainstormed that most of them, if not all, had only fuzzy notions about the sequence of events leading up to the civil rights movement. They began to offer such answers as "racism," "discrimination," "Martin Luther King," "slavery," "racial injustice," etc., without being able to show an understanding of the dynamics that led to the civil rights struggle in the U.S. I would have thought that their being sufficiently exposed to the deeply racially-polarized society in the U.S. would induce some kind of conjecture about the dynamics which propelled the civil rights movement.

With my ESOL students apparently having a smattering of the history of the civil rights movement, I thought it would be worthwhile to bridge their "information gap" first, then follow it up with a lesson that would include a discussion in class, a question-and-answer session, and finally, a writing assignment to reinforce what they would learn. The lesson was intended to help the students get a comprehensive understanding of what the civil rights movement represented, why it developed, and what it sought to achieve.

The aims of this approach were three-fold: (a) to promote language development, both verbal and written, through discussion and writing, (b) to encourage and create a learning environment which provides stimulus to pedagogical experimentation to determine how best to bridge the learners' "information gap" and eliminate tedium in the classroom, and (c) to emphasize process writing in the context of helping students express their own ideas with clarity and a degree of persuasiveness.

It is important to note that this was not the first time I discovered that the students' "information gap," rather than their lack of expression, weak grammar and poor organization, could seriously inhibit their ability to tackle an expository writing assignment on a controversial issue, as opposed to a free narrative/descriptive type of writing assignment.

What I have seen more often than not in my GED classes is that the students' writings on such topics as welfare reforms, universal health care, the death penalty, bilingualism, immigration, etc. show not so much their inability to reason or organize but rather their "information gap." When students lack enough information to draw on, they often end up being up against many serious problems: their writings tend to be shorter than what they admittedly should be, opinions abound in them but there are often few examples, or students sometimes relate personal experiences but have trouble generalizing.

I have gathered from my GED and ABE students that their reading habits have deteriorated largely because they have no access to libraries in their neighborhoods and because they hardly find any time to do anything after going through the daily ordeal of making a living. My ESOL students' writing ability is even more hamstrung by their understandably limited reading ability. I have, therefore, come to believe from my interactions with students in diverse adult education settings that, by and large, writing deficiency is the upshot of reading deficiency.

Using Video to Promote Writing

To bridge the learners' "information gap," I decided to show the video, "Mississippi: Is This America?" (from the *Eyes on the Prize* series) in my ESOL class to celebrate Black History Month. I was spurred by my previous experience at R.C.C. where I showed the same video a few years ago. The electrifying effect the video had on the audience and the volley of questions that followed left me in no doubt that the video had served its purpose in stimulating brainstorming about a writing assignment. My conversations with my ABE students at R.C.C. led me to believe that they were able to understand in broad terms the transition from the slavery days to the emergence of the civil rights struggle. With the gains of the civil rights movement now being under fire from all sides, I hoped that my current ESOL students would be able to better relate to what dire straits they would find themselves in if the country were to revert to the pre-civil rights struggle days.

My current ESOL students told me that they had neither seen nor heard of this video. But they became interested in it when I gave them a brief summary of its contents. I encouraged them to take notes during the video so that they might be able to remember the train

of events and piece them together in their writings later. I turned off the video from time to time to allow my students to discuss the issues on the video, brush up on their verbal skills and brainstorm about a writing assignment. Also, I encouraged them to generate questions about the issues on the video which were not quite clear to them.

I initiated the discussion by posing the questions: What was the civil rights movement about? Can you relate to it in any way? At times, I chimed in to steer the discussion in the right direction when it seemed to go off on a tangent, turning into personal chats or narration of how they suffered discrimination and humiliation in their workplaces, which tended to be repetitious and hence boring to the class. To lend the discussion a new dimension, I urged them to try to grasp that the civil rights movement developed as a reaction to the utter powerlessness of individual blacks in the face of the kind of inhumane treatment they were bitterly griping about and that the movement was meant to address the problem by empowering the minorities. The leaders of the movement believed that the peaceful solution to the problems caused by discrimination lay in the empowerment of the victims.

After some brainstorming, most learners and I agreed on a writing assignment as a follow-up to the video. They wanted an "easy" writing assignment because they argued that this was the first time they were exposed to a video as a teaching tool. The "easy" assignment we agreed on was: Write a brief account of the important features of the video, "Mississippi: Is this America?" However, some learners complained about the assignment being too hard for them and their lack of time to do such a "long writing assignment," as they put it. As they wanted a choice, I gave them an alternative assignment: "What were you doing in the Freedom Summer of 1964?" Interestingly enough, many learners said that they were going to do both. I thought that would be a good idea because the two different assignments would provide contrasting facets of writing skills: one assignment called for getting the main facts straight and organizing them sequentially, and the other, relatively easy assignment basically involved recalling and enumerating their own life experiences.

My experience is that students, generally speaking, delight in writing narrative/descriptive pieces simply because they have lots of content within their own life experiences which they can easily draw on and which they can personally relate to their writings. This renders their writings refreshingly readable. It is not difficult to understand why students always seem to lap up the opportunity of writing on such topics as: (a) describe your first week living in the U.S., (b) write about the village you grew up in, and (c) write about someone you have been very good friends with for many years.

The video, discussion, and question-and-answer session evoked a gamut of interesting informal responses from the students. One of the Chinese students remarked, "Before, I did not know what I saw on the video." One Haitian student said, "I understand it better now. Video show is better than lectures. When I see history on video, I learn it and remember it more easily." The Cape Verdeans reacted strongly to the murders committed in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer: "We did not know such terrible things happened here not so long ago. We learned only about slavery in school." All of them felt that a visual narrative which gives them access to a wealth of solid facts, information and viewpoints to which they did not have access before always gives them an advantage when it comes to writing on a subject with which they are not familiar. In other words, they recognized the efficacy of video as a powerful tool in bridging their "information gap."

By the time we rounded off the evening, a comprehensive picture of the civil rights movement and its dynamics had sunk in. The students responded positively to the participatory approach of the discussion that happened at intervals during the video show and acknowledged that they are where they are today thanks to the legacy of the civil rights movement.

Looking at Students' Writings

The accompanying pieces include the writings of some of my current ESOL students at the Community Learning Center who showed up on the windy and snowy evening to see the video and who subsequently turned in essays on the assignments on "Mississippi: Is This America?"

Usually I work with my students through a series of drafts and talking with them individually about how they should look at their own writings, what goals they have set themselves, how they propose to reach their goals, and what they think about their writings.

While correcting their writings, I am guided by a philosophy which encompasses the following criteria: (a) whether or not their writings have enough clarity for readers, (b) whether or not they are able to organize the matter logically and sequentially, (c) whether or not they are able to show basic reasoning skills, (d) whether or not they are capable of constructing paragraphs properly, (e) whether or not they can form their own opinions, draw their own conclusions and relate themselves to their writings, and (f) whether or not there are major solecisms and misspellings. I give weight to the criteria in order of their listing. I am not a stickler for purism, because I believe the whole language method, which I follow, emphasizes the context and meaning of

A brief account of the important features of the video "Mississippi: Is This America?" by Jean Bertin Cadet

When I saw the movie I was so excited because it was the first time that I did see it. I heard about it, but there is a big difference between what I see and what I hear. I saw so many events on the movie that I did not know about before. There was a lot of history of the black people, but I had no chance to learn about it before. The movie and the discussion helped me to learn a lot of facts about the history of the black people. Now I can write about the history better because you understand it much better when you see it and the teacher teaches you about it in class.

In the video, I saw for the first time how the black people in the South struggled to win their fundamental rights. They were living like in slavery times even forty years ago. They lived like slaves without any basic rights, but the U.S. abolished it a very long time ago. The black people had no right to vote like the white people, they had no schools like the white people, they could not go to white people schools, they could not register to vote, and they could not live in white neighborhoods. So the black people found some very good leaders who could show them how to unite, organize and fight for their rights. They worked very hard to organize and demonstrated for winning their rights even though some of them were beaten up or killed by white gangs. But it worked for them very well.

At that time the black people had such great leaders like Bob Moses, Medgar Evers, Roy Wilkens, Dave Dennis, and Gore Edgar. They were very young and had a lot new ideas about how to fight and win freedom for their people. The black people were fortunate that they had such people with courage to organize them and give leadership. This bunch of leaders build a national association to resist the white gangs which refused to give black people the right to vote.

During 1963-1964, the black people had no right to vote, they had no political power. Only white people were able to vote. The black leaders built Southern National Coordination Council to push for voting rights for black people and voters registration in the state of Mississippi. There was so much excitement in the whole of the United States that even white college students from the North went to the South and got together with black people to help them push for voting rights. This is the first time the white people lived in the homes of the black people in Mississippi and ate their food. They saw for the first time that the black people were like them. So they stayed with them in the summer of 1964, helped them set up schools and health clinics, they taught black pupils at the new schools and also gave them a lot of help in voter registration. They helped black people to get freedom and spent the whole summer with them working with them. Black and white people called it Freedom Summer. The white college students were killed by the racist whites because they were helping the black people to get their voting right which is in the U.S. Constitution. The white police in Mississippi did not do much to arrest the criminals even though they found their fingerprints.

Finally, the black people won their right to vote for which they struggled and suffered for centuries. They celebrated it with their new party: The Freedom Democratic Party. They had set up their new party because the white people did not accept them in their party. The white people were afraid that black and white people working together could give equality and real freedom to all races and make the U.S. the home of liberty in the whole world. From there they went to the Democratic Convention in Chicago and sat with the white people.

The movie told us that it is possible for the white and black people to live and work together, to stop hating each other, to live like neighbors, and bring changes in the U.S. without hate and fighting. We can work together and make the U.S. a great country for the world if we remember the history of what our leaders showed us in the Freedom Summer. I am proud I know the history of the black people's struggle for equality and freedom. All black people enjoy freedom today and do what can do today because of the leaders who died to give us freedom. Without the movie, I would not know about this exciting history of the U.S. I know now why I have freedom in the U.S. today. I did not know that before my new teacher showed this movie in class. He told us history we did not know before.

the whole sentence. However, sometimes extensive corrections are made at the request of students when they want to know how many errors there are in a particular draft.

A critical evaluation of their writings shows where my approach of bridging their "information gap" yielded results. As I discuss each piece of writing, I intend to focus on content rather than grammar. However, my students and I have spent some time reviewing the conventions of standard grammar, punctuation, paragraphing and spelling.

Jean Cadet's fine piece of writing on the video is an example of how access to facts and information can help generate a striking flow of words and expressions which makes the writing appear like a moving personal memoir. This piece must be judged in the context that he arrived in the U.S. not long ago. Besides, he told me that he did not know much U.S. history. Working through a series of drafts, he has been able to show that he can digest a lot of mostly unknown and fairly complicated facts, information and names and weld them together into an organizational framework which is appropriate for the assignment and which has considerable clarity to readers. He apparently writes with a feeling which is likely to evoke the fervor of the civil rights movement and help readers identify themselves with the issues which sparked the movement. The way he has marshaled the facts is extraordinary, considering that he is a recent immigrant, never saw a documentary like this before, and his reading/listening skills are not particularly high. Nevertheless, his writing is vivid and characterized by specificity.

What were you doing
in the Freedom Summer of 1964?
Jean Bertin Cadet

In 1964, I couldn't even talk! Because I was then only three years old. I was with my parents in the countryside. I thought they couldn't do anything without me. Because I really needed special attention from my parents. I was then too small to be myself. I couldn't think then for myself. I was not anybody then.

I still believe, at that time, they were so embarrassed with me. Because I was in front of them, or beside them always. When I remember that time I feel like to be a baby again. But, too bad for me; God won't let that happen again. I am sure my parents used to be there for me for twenty four hours a day. For me, however, there is a big difference between now and then before. Most of the time I wasn't happy. Because my parents are living far from me.

I am always thinking how helpful my parents used to be for me every day. I feel like homesick and so sad that all I can say, but I always ask God to protect all my parents for me, and I think this is the biggest gift I can ever receive from God.

By contrast, his personal piece on "What were you doing in the Freedom Summer in 1964?" is marked by a general lack of planning and organization, and the development seems unfocused and insufficient. The supporting statements are repetitious. It is a feature of many of my students' writings that they often tend to relate themselves to God or Jesus, which, I believe, stems from their gnawing sense of isolation in an alien society increasingly turning its back on the poor and huddled black masses yearning for freedom. Nonetheless, I do not believe that it is the job of a teacher to push his/her students to secularize their writings. A teacher's job is to help learners express their ideas, feelings, and opinions as effectively as possible. Nothing more than that.

Judging from his contrasting pieces of writings and having observed him in class over time, I tend to think that he revels in writing on topics on which he has some access to background knowledge. It always seems to bring out the best of his talents.

Orisa Teixeira is also a fine writer, albeit cast in a different mold. She seems to be at her best when it comes to writing on topics which allow her to draw heavily on her own life experiences and make meaningful and interesting connections. As she told me, a confusing welter of facts, information, and details acts as a turn-off for her. Hence her piece on the video understandably failed to bring out the best of her writing talents. It was, therefore, decided not to print it.

On the contrary, her piece, "1986: the unforgettable year of my life" (which is a modified version of the alternative assignment, "What were you doing in the Freedom Summer of 1964?" since she was born after 1964!) demonstrates the racy, easy-going, fluent and fascinating style that is Orisa's métier. This piece of writing shows how effortlessly she can construct an organizational framework that is clear and appropriate for the topic when she is least bothered by having to sort through a mass of facts and information. The development of the topic is particularly effective because of the specificity or the illustrative quality she has lent to it. The writing is vivid and has a lot of substance in it.

Written in her characteristic imaginative vein, Orisa's other piece, "Valentine's Day in my country," also makes interesting reading. She appears to be at her best while doing a narrative assignment. She seems to

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1986: The unforgettable year of my life
by Orisa Teixeira

It was the first year of my marriage. I bought myself a house and my mother was living with me. I was then back home and was very happy. My husband was working on a German ship.

Suddenly, my mother died. Oh! my God! It was like the whole world crashed on my head. I was shocked and confused. I couldn't even think anything else. All my dreams and happiness then suddenly disappeared.

My husband went back to the ship on another trip round the world. My brothers and sisters were living in the city, about two hours drive from where I was living. They had to go back home, and I had to stay at home all by myself.

Who's was going to live with me now? Here I was all by myself! I was so scared. I felt so sick. My head was hurting so bad because I could not sleep at night at all. I felt dizzy. I couldn't work. I thought that was the end of the world.

One month later, I still felt the same way. My husband came home that week. We went to see the doctor. At the hospital, they did some tests on me. My husband tried to explain to the doctor what was wrong with me. Finally, we had the results of the tests. My heart was beating very fast. The doctor said he wanted to talk with us together.

Oh my goodness! I was so scared! I thought probably I had cancer or something like that. I was very anxious when the doctor said, "Good news." "Good news?" I asked the doctor anxiously. The doctor said, "Yes, you're five weeks pregnant. I understand," the doctor continued, "you recently lost your mother, but you have to be strong to be able to take care of yourself." Oh my Lord! You are so wonderful. You took away someone very special from my life only to bring another one in my life. You are so kind and compassionate. Thank you, Jesus!

I still remember those days: a blend of sadness and happiness. But when my son was born I momentarily forgot that my mother was no more in my life.

Ten years later, I have two sons and the courage to face my future. But I still remember 1986, and, of course, the wise word of my mother to give me hope and courage in my life.

Valentine's Day in my country
by Orisa Teixeira

I can't tell you many things about how they celebrate Valentine's Day in my native country, Cape Verde, because I moved to Portugal when I was 8 years old.

Well, in Portugal we celebrate Valentine's Day the same way as the American people do. Everybody looks like being more in love with one another. You give roses, romantic gifts etc. Sometimes, you use Valentine's Day for the beginning of a new relationship. If you know, or like somebody, and he/she does not know it, then on Valentine's Day you have a chance to invite him/her to go out with you. He/she is going to know that you want to be more than a friend to him/her if you invite him/her to go out with you on Valentine's Day.

Otherwise, women just receive gifts from their boyfriends or husbands on Valentine's Day traditionally.

Many years ago, men were supposed to go out to work to support their wives and families. Women were supposed to stay at home and take care of children. Women were supposed to play an inferior role to men in society. For example, men take it as an insult if women want to pay for dinner on Valentine's Day.

How about changing this traditional role? How about girlfriends/wives inviting their boyfriends/husbands for dinner on Valentine's Day? How about boyfriends/husbands receiving gifts from their girlfriends/wives on Valentine's Day for a change?

I would like to know how men would react to my New Age ideas. I hope they will not see a threat to their superior role in society.

literally sail through while organization and development take care of themselves. It is interesting how she comes to a different topic toward the end of her writing; she touches on the roles of men and women in her country and the sexism underlying them. It is remarkable and perceptive of her to allude to ingrained sexism in her country in the context of the conventional roles of men and women on Valentine's Day.

As her piece provides an interesting perspective, I xeroxed her writing and handed out copies in my class one day for a discussion on the issue Orisa brought up in her writing. In a reversal of traditional roles, how would men like the idea of receiving gifts from their lovers, girlfriends and wives on Valentine's Day? As we started to brainstorm, the topic appeared to be very provocative to men. The class was split along the gender line as the students wrangled over the issue of sexism. At the end of the noisy evening, they seemed to be as divided along the gender line as before. A writing assignment on "The traditional roles of men and women in society: right or wrong?" revealed the familiar divide in the class and the repetition of the same arguments.

Orisa by temperament is not partial to being provided with prior background knowledge about the topic and has let it be known that organizing a mass of material is not her cup of tea. A laid-back, reminiscing and open-ended style of writing without being tied down by recently-acquired background knowledge seems to be her forte.

Christine Sylfrin's writing on the video assignment is a clear testimony to the effectiveness of the approach of bridging the learners' "information gap." As she told me, she came to the U.S. in 1988 and "did not know so many things" about the civil rights movement. In fact, she had the vaguest of notions about the civil rights movement before she saw the video. Yet her writing is remarkable for its organizational framework, specificity, attention to details (like all those names of persons and organizations she never heard before!) and clarity.

Maria Fernandes' writing about the video is an example of somebody who needs to work on the structural framework but who has enough content to work with. She did get straight some important facts, even some important names, from the video, although she told me that she had not learned anything about the civil rights movement back in her native country. Her problem seems to be that she does not get enough time to hone her organizational framework by methodical practice through a series of drafts. She seems to have the potential of being a better writer, but her lack of spare time seems to be her main obstacle.

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The important features of the video "Mississippi: Is This America?" by Chrisline Sylfrin

The problem of discrimination against the black people was the worst in Mississippi. It was not like that in the northeastern states. The black people in Mississippi did not have any power, they could not vote in the elections, they could not send their kids to the white schools, they did not have good houses to live in, they did not have running water and bathrooms in their houses. The black people lived separately from the white people in every way. This means there was segregation in Mississippi. Racial segregation was the problem in Mississippi, but it was against the U.S. law. So the black people united and started a big movement for equal treatment in law and in actual practice.

The black people got together to fight for their basic rights. Medgar Evers became their leader. He was an important member of N.A.A.C.P. It was the old black civil rights organization. Evers was helped by other very important black leaders like Bob Moses of S.N.C.C., and Rev. Merly Evers who was only 37 years old when he died. These leaders organized black people in Mississippi and started the movement to win equal rights for all people. They also started the voter registration process in Mississippi so that black people can vote and stop discrimination. The white racists killed Medgar Evers because they did not want to give black people the right to vote. The movement of the black people became so big that many white people went to Mississippi from the northeastern states and helped the black people there to help with voter registration and starting schools. The white people did not like this, so they attacked them and forced them to not help black people.

But, finally, the black people won the right to vote for the first time in 1964. This was possible because of those black leaders who helped us get our legal rights to vote and go to the same school. The video and the lesson helped me to know the history of the black people. I did not know it before. Now, I know how the black people have progressed in this country. Without the video nobody told me the history.

The important features of the video "Mississippi: Is This America?" by Maria Fernandes

It was February 2nd when I saw the movie about Mississippi. The movie I had seen was about the history of the struggle of the black people.

The movie showed a bunch of events about the black people and their rights, which happened many years ago in Mississippi.

The movie showed how some black leaders had been killed and arrested. They were fighting for the black people in Mississippi.

Also, the movie talks about those leaders who gave their lives for the freedom of the black people. They died and were arrested for fighting for their people. One of the black leaders was Medgar Evers. He was a member of the N.A.A.C.P. He was killed by the racists. Another leader who I remember is Bob Moses, and the other man's name is William J. Simmons.

I learned the history of the fight by black people for their rights and to stop discrimination. I did not know all these details I saw on the movie.

What I was doing in 1964 by Maria Fernandes

In 1964, I was a little girl, so at this time, I do not remember that much of what I was doing in the summer of 1964. But I do remember when my mother used to tell us about the hard lives of the people in my country. She told us stories about how people lived in my country, what they had to do, because, at that time, there were no cars, schools, shops, markets etc.

She told me that people in my country had to fight for every thing in their life. Those people had a very difficult time. Anyway, the country started to get better after 1975. In 1975, when I was 17 years old, my country, Cape Verde became free from the Portuguese colonial rule. I remember how freedom came on July 5, 1975.

Later the country became better because we had more job openings. There were jobs for those who never had one before in their lives. Things started to change for everyone in the country. People begin to get education. Their life started to change, and they were very happy about it. Everything was very different. After independence, the country grew economically. In other words, after July 5, the whole country became so much better. We had jobs, markets, schools etc.

The most important thing was the opportunity for adult education. That was the best part of the social programs of the government. In 1975, there was a lot of people who did not know how to read or write. Then I thought it was only in my country there were so many illiterates; but now I understand that it was the same in many colonies. Even in the U.S. about half the adults are unable to read or write. I learned this from a TV program.

These are my memories of the summer of 1975 when my country began its new life. It has still a long way to go.

The important features of the video "Mississippi: Is This America?" by Maria Borges

Mississippi suffered from the effects of segregation; the black people were fighting to have the right to vote so that they could vote and end all kinds of discrimination. The black people were still like slaves. They did not have any rights like the slaves. They tried to do anything to get their freedom, and stop the racist violence against them.

The black people worked like slaves on the cotton fields, but they had no rights. Medgar Evers, a member of the N.A.A.C.P., tried to organize the black people to protest discrimination, but he was murdered by the white racists in 1963. The Mississippi police found the fingerprint of a member of the Citizens Council, an organization of the racist whites of Mississippi. But he was acquitted, because he was white and the police officers were also white. Also, three young black students disappeared in Mississippi. They came to Mississippi from other states to help and work with the blacks in Mississippi. The killer was found a year later.

Volunteers, blacks and whites, came to Mississippi from the other states of the U.S. They lived and worked and ate together for the first time. They came to Mississippi in the summer of 1964 to help the black people to get their freedom and the right to vote. Before only the white people had the right to vote even though they did not know how to read.

The black and white volunteers were going from house to house in Mississippi to register black voters. They sat, ate, lived and talked with the black people for the first time. The white volunteers from the other states found out that the black people were people with the same state of mind and the same feelings as the white people.

The experience of the new relationship between blacks and whites in 1964 summer helped black people win the right to vote and set up their new party called Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. They later went to the National Convention in Atlanta but they were not accepted by the Democratic Party.

The whites in the Democratic Party did not want blacks to sit in the convention, but the blacks had already made a great progress on the road to freedom.

Carnival by Maria Borges

In the Azores, we don't celebrate Valentine's Day, but we do have a Valentine's Day of sorts! It means in Portuguese: Dia dos Namurados. But on that day we celebrate a big feast in the Azores.

Carnival is the name of the big feast on February 14th. We dance, drink, and eat a lot of different kinds of food for three days. We do have lots of fun, too. Some people put on colorful costumes and masks to celebrate the feast. The children have water guns to play with. They spray water at the people, while they dance merrily. It's fun and fun.

We play a lot of different kinds of musical instruments, and sing beautiful songs. Some guys dress up in ladies' clothes, and they use make up, too.

What were you doing in the Freedom Summer of 1964?
by Eugenio Fernandes

I came to the U.S. from the Republic of Cape Verde. Cape Verde is situated off the west coast of Africa. It is about 500 kilometers from the coast of the west African country of Senegal. It is located very close to major international shipping routes.

I remember I was 14 years old in 1964. Cape Verde was then governed by Portugal. It was a colony of Portugal for 500 years. The Portuguese governor of Cape Verde visited the island where I lived. I never saw the governor visiting my island before. The governor lived in the capital located in another island where a large population concentrates. The Cape Verde is actually an archipelago.

The governor visited my community during the visit. In his speech, he made a promise to create more jobs, construct a new road, build new schools, hospitals and other projects. The people were very happy when the governor visited our community. The people believed the governor and hoped they will have better life. Later the governor returned to the capital. He never did anything he promised in his speech during the visit to my community. The people learned the mistake to believe the promises made by politicians. My island and my community remained as poor as before and the people suffered as before. Nothing changed.

Valentine's Day
by Chrisline Athis

Valentine's Day in my native country, Haiti is an occasion like in any other country. But Valentine's Day differs from country to country. It depends on the culture of that country. For example, in Haiti, people celebrate Valentine's Day mostly between husbands and wives, and girlfriends and boyfriends. The most common gifts given are chocolates, flowers, lingerie, and of course, warm kisses. For every one who gets involved in a relationship, he or she expects to get together on Valentine's Day just to make sure that the day is memorable.

Even in schools, students get very motivated. Most students dress up in pink with a bouquet of flowers attached on the front of their clothes. And, it is a half-day in school. It is a day of celebration for the young people. It is the most romantic day for every lover in my country.

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Thoughts about adoption
by Jean Eccehomo

Adoption is sometimes good and sometimes bad. However, it is normal for people to adopt children. People adopt children when they can't have their own children, or when the parents of some children die, they are adopted by some people. But I don't think adoption is good for anyone who has no possibilities to raise the adopted children.

In 1987 I adopted my brother's child because he died. Though a biological child is something great, an adopted child can also fulfill the feelings of love and affection. I think you need to have some income to take care of your adopted child. My wife doesn't even have to work. This adopted baby is fortunate because he would always have a person in the house to take care of him. This baby will be happy. He will never go to a babysitter. These are very positive and encouraging signs for the future. But I wonder if there will be a problem for the family in the future because there is no biological connection between the parents and the adopted child. I think ethnic differences between parents and the adopted child are very important and can create many problems in the family in the future. A biological child is really part of the mother. It has similar blood and looks like the father and the mother. The most important thing is that the mother carries the baby for nine months in her womb.

Adoption is good because it helps orphans, but I think we have to be careful about interracial adoptions. Such adoptions may create problems which may be bad for the healthy and proper development of the adopted child. We need to think seriously before we adopt children.

Maria Borges is another student who knew little about the civil rights movement before she saw the video and often had difficulty understanding the train of events because she was very exhausted after a hard day's work. For all her obvious difficulties, she was able to follow and grasp most of what she saw on the video and to retain an astonishing number of details. Her problem apparently seems to be her lack of spare time, not her lack of talent, for she needs to plug away at her organizational framework and clarity.

Frazzled and totally drained as he appeared to be at the end of a hard day's work, Eugenio Fernandes told me that he would not be able to concentrate on the video and follow it carefully. So he said that he would like to do the alternative assignment. His well-written piece is another example of students' finding it relatively easy to construct an organizational framework, flesh it out with effective supporting statements/ideas, add specificity or illustrative quality, work on clarity and fluency, and eliminate errors in the conventions of standard English as long as they have enough substance (i.e., the background knowledge) to work with. Eugenio's writing has a good organizational framework and good clarity with effective supporting statements because of their substance, specificity and illustrative quality. His writing is vivid, precise and extremely readable.

In analyzing and reviewing the learners' writings, it appears that most students benefited from my experimental approach. Judging from their spontaneous participation, spirited discussion and evocative comments, they seemed to profit from this pedagogical approach because they felt it made them more confident and better equipped to get a handle on a writing assignment in so far as it aided marshaling of facts and information and organizing the vital framework for writing.

The moving video documentary, coupled with an open-ended discussion in class, enabled Jean Cadet, Christine Sylfrin and Maria Borges to write pieces characterized by clarity, specificity and suitable supporting statements. However, for students like Maria Fernandes, for whom organizing a framework is still difficult, my approach at least enabled her to get started. Drawing on her newly-acquired background knowledge for content, she could now confidently set about putting together an organizational framework.

However, for a student like Orisa the volume of new information appeared to be too overwhelming. Therefore, I believe that the approach of bridging the learners' "information gap" is still critical, but a video and a follow-up discussion are just one way of implementing the approach. Other imaginative methods need to be devised and tried out for more successful implementation of my approach. The pieces written by Chrisline A. ("Valentine's Day"), Eugenio F. ("My life in 1964"), Maria F. ("What I was doing in 1964"), Jean E. ("Thoughts about adoption"), Maria B. ("Carnival" and "Earthquake") and Orisa T. ("How we celebrate Valentine's Day in my country" and "1986: The unforgettable year in my life") demonstrate the ease and clarity with which students are able to write when it comes to writing narrative/descriptive pieces with the opportunity to make use of content from within their own life experience.

Conclusions

I have resolved to encourage my students even more strongly to build their background knowledge. The video as a writing stimulus helped them to choose a framework: Most followed a chronological sequence alternating with summaries of events and conditions and supplemented their own knowledge with other specific facts and examples. My fervent hope is that this article would renew educators' efforts to build their students background knowledge rather than their reading and writing skills independent of content. Furthermore, I hope that more research is done on approaches for bridging the "information gap" and its consequent effect on students' writing. To students I would like to quote James Madison, who wrote: "A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or tragedy, or perhaps both." Empower yourselves by capitalizing on the available opportunities, however inadequate they may be. •

Organizing Inspiration

Marty Kingsbury

Two of the student essays included here were born out of my own curiosity to know more about my students' learning histories. My students, young women on AFDC, are all testing for the G.E.D. Despite the fact that their reading skills are solidly high school level, they struggle with the passages in social studies and science; the word problems in math are threatening and intimidating; the writing test is "for tweezers only." It's not that they don't study, it's that learning itself is often baffling.

I began with a lot of questions for which I just wanted them to take notes: Describe your elementary school; describe your teacher, your first friends. How did you learn to read? Did your mother read to you? Did you play school with older siblings? How did you learn your letter sounds? Your numbers? What books did you read at school? *Dick and Jane*? Children's books? Do you remember any titles?

I wanted to know if they learned by phonics or by whole language. I really wanted to know if they could locate for themselves any learning difficulties in comprehension, spelling, or phonics. But even below that, I wanted to know if they could locate if and where in the process education simply fell apart.

To keep it interesting, to inspire the next step of prose, and, since I'm aware of their commitment to their children to finish school, to make conscious the breaking of a cycle, I asked my students to take these notes and write them up as letters to their children which they could each reopen on the child's first day of school. I wanted them to see that writing is communication, not only to the world outside, but also to ourselves.

But, like many other writing exercises, the taking of notes is fun, the sharing of information is a blast, and the creation of prose is laborious. Only Josie, who is a writer and an artist, managed to complete the entire process. Nicole, who joined us a month later, developed her essay on her own to explore her relationship with math.

As a teacher, I am forever defining and redefining my notion of success. I failed in my ambition to achieve beautifully flowing prose on paper from every one of them, but I did find this exercise helpful. It was both satisfying and educational for my students to share their learning histories with each other and me, and they were equally generous in sharing the ways they originally learned spelling and reading.

Khalida's essay on abortion is more typical of the writing I do. We start the essay process together, talking through vast quantities of personal experience and social opinions to find something that is both comfortable and interesting to write. Sometimes we sit and talk while I take the initial notes, and then I leave them to swim upstream with words on paper.

Abortion, homelessness, crime, drugs, teenage parenting, welfare, shoddy housing, or poverty—all are subjects with which my students are often all too familiar, but they can also be grist for the imagination. Mothers, love, sensuality, respect, apologies, dreams, heroism, fathers, and work are good back-up topics when all the political issues seem irrelevant. And if those don't work, then it's blank paper (or a journal, if I have one) and pens.

Khalida is more independent than most and she was able to throw me out when we landed on an idea. I stayed long enough to discuss the process of notes, organization, drafts. We easily agreed on the time it saves and the pleasure it can bring to the writing process to indulge in ideas without the responsibility of sentences, paragraphing and transitions. Her essay simply bloomed. We talked about some little things in

the writing, but most of our attention was given to the fun of reading, to the turning of a phrase, the flow of long winding sentences followed by simple statements, the shaping of dependent and independent clauses.

Khalida, Josie, and Nicole are all women who find either solace or ease in writing and in this they are somewhat exceptional. For those who have passed the Writing Test with satisfying scores, I find they are not interested in continuing with the tedious examination of their writing. Sometimes they indulge me because I am the teacher, but too soon I find they are losing steam, getting bored, or reminded of the enormous responsibilities waiting for them outside the door.

If they write, it is for self-expression. If they don't, it's because they "don't know where to put the commas." Keeping their attention, as well as mine, on the multiple-task process of thinking clearly and writing an essay may be one of the most difficult tasks I face as a GED teacher, but it's also one of the most fun. •

Back in Elementary
by Josie Reyes

When I was a little girl at the age of 6, I started to go to a school called The John Breen School. I was not very interested at first. As the days went by, I started to like it. The school was a brown bricked building. It had four floors and the classrooms were kind of small. There were desks in my class. I sat way in the back. There were a lot of learning toys useful for us to play with.

I had a woman for a teacher. She was like "59" inches long. She had black hair to her knees, green eyes, butterscotch skin color, and her name was Janelin Piano. A very elegant lady.

At the beginning of the school year when I started going to school, I met some friends that till this day we're still friends. Their names are: Mary Pena, Jenny Torres, Michael Rosado, Tito Soto, Edquardo Rios, Iris Hernandez, Johnny Rodriguez, Carmen Rodriguez, David Medina, Monique Medina, and some other students that were in my class. We all used to get along in my class. I knew my alphabets and numbers 1 thru 15 and some of the other students did, too. I used to look up to my teacher a lot. I wanted to be like her. She taught me a lot of things in the first grade.

To my memory I remember the way she used to teach me reading and writing. She used to make me read out loud. An example: I used to read the story out loud and if I used to mess up on a word, she used to make me read it again for writing. I had 5 spelling words. I had to write them 5 times each and do a sentence on each word. At the end of the week, on Friday, I either had a spelling test or a story to write with the words. When it came to activities I liked gym and recess.

As the years went by and I got older, I started getting sick of school. I never thought of dropping out of school. I had my boring days and boring teachers, but in some ways they used to make it fun. The day I dropped out of school from the Greater Lawrence Technical High School was two weeks before I had my son Roberto Abel Reyes. I did not want to drop out but I did not have a choice.

Nowadays I think about the past and I start thinking about all my mistakes, and I really regret doing them. At the same time I learned from them. That's why I'm still going to school. I'm getting my G.E.D. I want my son to see his mommy doing something with her life. I want to teach my son my knowledge and my skills so when he grows up he will be a smart young man. I want my son to be a high school graduate. I want him to know that his mommy finished high school. All I want him to do is take it day by day and give time some time. He is only going to be two years old, but if I start teaching him what I have learned, what's right from wrong, what's good and what's bad in life in the future, he won't have a problem with his life.

Sincerely to myself and my son,
Josie Reyes
April 1, 1995

Biography: My name is Josie Reyes. I'm a student at the Crittenton Hastings House. I live at the Crittenton, too. I'm a mother of a two year old son by the name of Roberto A. Reyes. In my spare time I like to write stories, make my own poems, and draw, which I'm very talented at. Right now I'm looking forward to graduating from my GED, and start looking for a job. I'm also searching for a home for my son and I through housing search.

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Looking Back
by Nicole Lamar

My name is Nicole Lamar and I am presently attending Crittenton Hastings House, which is a G.E.D. program. Today's date is May 7, 1996 and I am in class trying to figure out my past. Let me take you back to the good old days before I really knew what I wanted from life.

I am seventeen years of age and I've been to more schools than the age I am. Through all the schools I've been to, I've had a lack of learning ability in the subject of math.

Let me tell you about the lady who helped me with that lack of ability. Her name is Mrs. Hasberry.

* * *

Graduation was just three months away and I was behind in one subject: only the worst subject in the world; the one subject I just couldn't seem to understand; the one subject that made my heart beat 100 mph; the subject that made a hot day feel cold; none but the one and only, my enemy: math.

I could still feel the vibes running through my body every afternoon right after recess. All the different ways of doing math. All the different numbers running through my head, flushing, overflowing my head.

Patiently waiting for that special smell, that certain sound of shoes clocking against the floor, that certain jingle of bracelets jingling, bracelets that she wore every day, the most beautiful shells and different designs I've ever seen in my life. Then, suddenly, hearing the gasp of breath as she walked into the class just finishing three flights of stairs.

I would be the only odd ball who always greeted her with a "Good afternoon, Mrs. Hasberry." She was the most organized teacher I've ever known, holding the work she copied from the copying machine so very neatly stacked under her armpits.

Mrs. Hasberry got straight down to business avoiding any hesitation. As she walked to the chalkboard, picking up the chalk and starting to write, I finally felt at ease.

She would never move to another part of math until she knew everyone had it down pat. Everyday I learned bits and pieces about division. Eventually I was the one at the chalkboard helping other students to understand the work I did to get the answer. That special teacher taught me division and decimals; she even worked with me on adding and subtracting. After school my teacher volunteered to help me with the basics, and I just sat there, still, not moving an inch, listening to the directions, then watching her hands work the problems out.

I took head to everything she taught me. I guess that's why I was the teacher's pet. I could tell she believed in me. It's the reason I started believing in myself. She spoke so calmly, so filled with hope, wishing for the same thing I was, wishing for that day when I'm walking across the stage with my fifth grade diploma in hand.

Suddenly she got quiet. "What is she thinking about? Why did she stop working?" I wondered. Then it came to me. I must have been stupid, not thinking about what she told the students and I one week ago. The news that had me curious, mad, and frustrated all at the same time. All of a sudden, we were thinking about the same thing, as if we were connected in some unknown way. She made a comment, "I sure am going to miss all of you kids when I retire. I'm going to pray that all of you be successful in life, you hear?"

I slowly stated, "Are you going to miss me the most? I don't want you to leave. You're the best teacher I've ever had in my life."

"Well, there will be many more," she said, looking like she was sad, but saying it like she was happy.

I was upset with the comment she gave back, but I didn't let her know that.

Three months later I graduated and the students and I pitched in for a surprise party.

Biography: My name is Nicole Lamar and I'm 17 years of age. I am presently attending Crittenton Hastings House, which is a GED school, and from which I am looking forward to graduating. I'm a sister to one brother and a loving mother to my new six month old baby boy, named Tyquan D. Long-Lamar. I'm interested in making designer clothes, writing, track, and working to have a career in computers.

Should Abortion Be Legal or Illegal?
by Khalida Smalls

Should abortion be legal or illegal? This question is very controversial. The answer will decide if women have the right to choose whether or not to keep their unborn children.

Pregnancy is not always planned. More often it is accidental or simply unexpected. Regardless, a woman should always have the right to decide what happens to her body.

Many women become pregnant at a young age and are not ready to become mothers. Having a child at a young age can seriously conflict with a young person's life. Their education is not complete and harder to achieve while raising a child. These young women are also financially unable to care for a child. Abortion will give these young people a chance, a chance to live out their teenage years, a chance to become educated.

Today there are many diseases which have no cure and can be passed on to an unborn child. One in particular, the H.I.V. virus, develops into A.I.D.S. The right to abort will prevent a child from suffering from this disease and many others.

Some women are not aware of certain health problems until after pregnancy when they cause complications. There are some women whose physical condition may not allow her to survive during childbirth. In this situation many women choose to abort. A woman in this situation should have a choice to live. The right to abort gives her that choice.

Abortion should remain legal. To take the right of choice away from women is wrong. There are ways of preventing unwanted pregnancies, but none are one hundred per cent effective. If a woman becomes pregnant, she decides if she is ready to take on this if time responsibility. Raising a child is not easy. You must be ready financially and emotionally. If you're not ready, the best thing for you and the unborn child would be to wait.

Abortion will give young women a chance and adult women a choice.

Biography: My name is Khalida Smalls and I am nineteen years old. I am the proud mother of a beautiful ten month old baby boy, named Ziquelle G. Smalls. I attend a GED program at Crittenton Hastings House in Brighton. After receiving my GED, I am looking forward to going to college. I am interested in a variety of things: writing, reading, mathematics and psychology to name a few.

Our Piece of Town

Sam Bernstein

Chinatown is the center of daily life for the thousands of Asian immigrants and refugees in Greater Boston as well as the home away from their homelands for upwards of fifteen thousand. It is also a center of employment for garment workers, electronics assemblers, Chinese supermarket cashiers, dim-sum cart pushers, kitchen helpers, waiters, cooks and others whose salaries barely exceed $4.00 an hour with few if any benefits. The low end of the secondary job market tails away into obscurity here with people like my student, who found her full-time, $7.00-a-day, no-benefits-included, restaurant job through a family connection, and feels lucky at that because her basic literacy level is so low. Her English is beginning to improve finally, but in very limited ways, in the last six months since she has had to use it to serve up dim sum to American customers.

Nevertheless, in spite of rampant unemployment and underemployment, particularly for those whose English is sub-par, very few Chinese I have met in eight years either receive or would opt for welfare benefits if there was any realistic alternative. Working hard seems to be the primary ethical standard by which Chinese immigrants measure themselves and each other. As a complementary principle, struggling as hard as one can to make use of the system within the limitations one finds in it seems to be a common theme in the lives of most people. Changing the miserable conditions of one's employment or fighting in consolidated fashion against an oppressive socio-economic system is perceived with good reason as too risky. The reality of this struggle is that upward mobility is experienced only in starts and stops. Getting laid-off is a common occurrence in factory work and cooks are often jobless in the slow season. Piece work or its equivalent, going from one bad job to another not secure or sustainable employment is the norm.

Better jobs may come with experience, but learning English is seen as the way out of the continuing scramble for depressed labor. Unfortunately many students see little hope for themselves as language learners. They believe they are too old or slow. Furthermore, given the overwhelming discontinuity of their economic lives, it is not surprising that these adult ESOL students might desire an extremely high level of structured presentation. Predictable structure would at least partially compensate them for what they are clearly being denied outside the school. So, on the one hand, students have high expectations of the program, but meanwhile they feel that very little can be expected of them—at most an incomplete assemblage or repertoire, fragmentary bits of learning. Sometimes this general pessimism is manifested in sporadic attendance and a lack of real participation. More often, for students who are less literate and less well equipped to deal with structured grammar-based lessons, for example, an alternative becomes either repeating the current semester level, or dropping out and coming back later when there has been enough language acquisition through real life experience to permit management of the array of decontextualizations encountered in our curriculum. Ironically, breaking up one's life and marginalizing one's participation are reproduced in the school experience, with all too devastating results for language learning.

Our room is on the fourth floor of an embattled structure, the Quincy School Community Council annex at 34-36 Oak Street, fought over for decades by the hospital complex and the Chinatown community. As it multiplies itself and grows and enfolds and warps its seemingly unalterable way down the very spine of Chinatown, the hospital has stubbed its toe once and for

all on this one last piece of real-estate. Parcel C was earmarked for construction of an eight-story hospital parking garage that would have completely engulfed our classrooms and daycare center, until the Chinatown Coalition of neighborhood agencies finally beat the BRA (Boston Redevelopment Authority) proposal last fall. Covering the entire outside wall on the Harrison Avenue face of the structure, there is a huge painted mural representing the people of Chinatown, their struggles, hopes and dreams. A large color photo of this mural taken at our annual Oak Street Fair, balloons and all, hangs prominently in our central office.

34 Oak Street has been under renovation during the middle two months of this semester, and the street itself, which is only slightly grander than an alley, just under our windows, has been in its last stages of sewer channeling and resurfacing for at least a year now. The noise of the backhoes and jackhammers from outside, complementing demolition and construction inside, with dust storms rising through the building, was often unbearable during much of this semester. The fire alarms intermittently went off in deafening fashion adding to a remarkable array of unending special effects. Finally, about one or two weeks before it was all over, we were forced by the city inspector to evacuate the building because he finally decided conditions made it uninhabitable. The fourth floor was still better than other more crowded classrooms, though. This winter we managed to purchase folding desk chairs to replace crowded long tables. The chairs are movable and they give us enough space for eight little old Macintosh computers recently donated by NYNEX and the reconditioned windows-supporting Wang, which we use for telecommunications. This way it's comfortable for students to write on one side of the room and then move over to the computers when they're ready to do word processing.

The Morning Class

The Semester 5 class at 8:30 in the morning is comprised of students of mixed literacy levels. Some of them were able to move easily through the Semester 2, 3 and 4 textbooks; others like You Ting, Feng Chu, Li Hua, Chou Kok and to some extent Yat Mei, who have little or no preparation for the grammar and vocabulary of these books, could not do them. Unfortunately because we have no other lower-level class at this time of day, the lowest students cannot repeat a level to give them more time to find ways to deal with the text. So we have a mixed-level group. While previous teachers were cognizant of the unusual challenge faced by over a third of the class and handled the curriculum in a bilingual and conversational way, they also managed to complete the text at each level. I won't make it this time. With four weeks left, there is still half of the Semester 5 book untouched. We've only studied 54 pages. This book is a killer anyway. It's full of grammar and maybe 400 difficult vocabulary words. Students have suggested that we can still save the semester if I will just teach them the book faster now. I can't. When will I give them the mid-semester test? Later, much later.

My overall scheme this semester was to try to include enough writing and computer networking projects to produce authentic texts from which to teach more interactively than I have previously. I wanted to invite students to contribute enough of their own ideas and language (using a variety of techniques) to create a "living text." I thought that mutually we could produce a lens, so to speak, through which to observe the culture of Chinatown and make connections between our lives here and the larger outside community. Coupled with this new approach though was the same old book-driven classwork and homework, but with less emphasis. My guess was that the project side might not capture too much interest. I based this projection on past experience, and also on the recognition that student expectations and program structure are less than conducive for making an individual conversion in one class to whole language. Still I hoped to induce more interest and active participation than I have been used to in students. One point of optimism was that we were generally better equipped technologically, at least in this particular room, than ever before.

My point of inquiry was to see whether I could create some genuine engagement in projects to the extent that dropping the book, or at least severely de-emphasizing its use, would become acceptable to students. I planned to fiddle with technology and projects with one hand while stringing the class along with the other, using the old book and the old way, hoping to keep otherwise disenchanted students from wandering off in the middle of my experiment. Students' resistence to new approaches is well known at our school. So much so that some teachers, including me occasionally, have simply given up on promoting student-initiated discourse in classes because it seemed impossible. It's uncomfortable trying to account for students dropping out sometimes, complaining they are learning nothing. The need to demonstrate our school's high retention rate to the state Department of Education and other funding sources further sensitizes us to how well we are satisfying perceived needs, and of course our reputation in Chinatown is of tremendous concern to staff and administrators alike.

Our conventional tactic then has three parts: 1) the teacher poses questions and the students answer, following the sentence pattern or inserting the correct vocabulary word; 2) the class uses grammar-driven books calculated to raise students' competence on

manipulating surface structures from one semester to the next; 3) the students take discrete point tests which assess specific points of grammar or which assess grammatical points in isolation. In this way the teacher talks through the book, making it possible for students to digest the grammar and vocabulary. Because it is possible to spend hours of class time asking questions and hearing answers, but never asking a genuine question for which I don't already know or anticipate the answer, I call this the "talking book" approach. From time to time this has been labeled "student centered" because it was the approach students wanted, or at least reported that they wanted. A former program director explained to me that students were periodically surveyed about what the staff should write into our textbooks. The students wanted and got survival topics, vocabulary lists, bilingual grammar explanations and exercises, and pre-fabricated dialogues. Subsequent non-negotiations with students about "the book" have helped to keep the program rooted in familiar practices.

Loving the Egg

I have personally developed a way of demonstrating my respect for our tradition of producing and using dictations and tests on surface structures and vocabulary by not only scheduling dithering like this about every two weeks in my classes, but also constructing big colorful charts listing all the students, the dates and numerical scores on their quizzes. I use colored markers, with a different color for each quiz. I hang the chart prominently on the wall. Students enjoy seeing how everybody is doing. It structures the work in a safe predictable way. If students don't show up for a dictation, there is a blank beside their name. I try to make the quizzes very passable. If students study at home the designated sentences from the book containing one of these vocabulary words, they can get a hundred points, even if they don't understand one word. If they don't study though, they will fail. Sometimes they get a zero. We call this "the egg." It is a source of amusement. Some students tease each other about it. I sometimes point to the eggs and use them as a motif for various forms of admonition. I've even demonstrated crying over eggs. This is great fun. It proves that I want to teach them and help them. It shows them that I know what they should do and that I care about their progress. It demonstrates my teacherly love for them and ultimately my patience with their trials and tribulations.

This semester the chart hangs on the back wall, directly over the head of Chou Kok. He is one of those who are completely unable to deal with the text and the other decontextualized material. He is also very slow to respond verbally to anything. When I try to talk to him, he won't try to respond directly. He always waits for another student to translate. He has produced great writings this semester, including letters about smoking to students in Ohio, other letters to students in New York, and some travel writing about Peking and Mongolia. His dictations and tests were not good, though somehow he didn't get the egg. Fortunately for Chou Kok the tests and dictations didn't continue for very long this term. In the second month quite a few students including Chou Kok asked me not to bother any more. We were using the text less and less, and computers were very interesting for many students; they began to take up a lot of time. Chou Kok told me after class at one point that the computer writing and networking were producing "living language" for them to work with instead of the "dead language" in the book. I was surprised to hear any student say this. I don't know where or how he had managed to decide on making the point this way. Perhaps he sensed that these are my sentiments and concluded gradually that they must be valid. Or maybe he really felt that way himself. Anyway I was pleased to oblige by not scheduling any more tests. I still haven't taken down the chart despite there only being a few dates filled in.

Old Ways: The Talking Book

During the first half of the semester we managed to stay pretty much on track using the talking book approach, or actually my own version of teacher-centered, page-by-page presentation of the text. My way is to try to open up the discussion of the vocabulary to include anything that seems meaningful in addition to covering the words one by one. I also allowed time for pairs to practice or read from the text before or after whole class activity. I walk around to the pairs and trouble shoot or schmooze. Of course I used supplementary worksheets as well.

While it was clear that students appreciated my attempts at deep scaffolding, I often felt very frustrated about what was happening in these lessons. I found that it was extremely difficult to get students to respond meaningfully in English using the words in the vocabulary lists to create discussion using my own initiating questions. Sometimes, students broke away from the topic altogether in Chinese for long interludes until finally, if I was unable to figure out the gist, someone, usually one of the men, would translate back to me what had been said. I didn't want to insist that Chinese not be used at all. I did try to get agreement that there should be limits because this is an English class after all. Students did agree in principle, but in practice the limits were impossible to enforce because, in some cases, students needed to catch up with what was going on, and, in other cases, were discussing parts of the lesson or talking about other important events and support was needed from other students. I understood some of the interaction in Chinese, but when I wasn't

sure I became hesitant to cut off something meaningful.

The talking book approach almost succeeded one day in April. We were in the middle of the vocabulary in the employment unit, and Yat Mei, who had just been laid off and was *desperate* for work came to class saying she was going to the Marriott Hotel that afternoon to apply for a housekeeping *position*. She went over her whole situation with the guys in the class in Chinese before I could break through the din to get her to try any English explanation at all, by which time I had also understood the reasons for her anxiety. There was very little she seemed to be able to tell me in English. The little bit she tried to say led us right back to the book. Her problem, she thought, was number 5, *experience*. I used a clever synthesis of Chinese and English to enliven the pronunciation: x-beer-ㄙ-ㄦ-s. It worked! They got the pronunciation quickly, more quickly than ever in my previous teaching of this word. She said she didn't have any. I didn't believe it. She is well into mature middle age, intelligent, thoughtful, industrious and seems relatively clear about the way things work, even in this country. She suggested she might lie and say she had done hotel work in Boston before. I, taking the part of a potential interviewer, asked her at which hotel. That broke her confidence in duping the personnel department. We eventually got around to the experience she did have. Restaurant work in Venezuela, factory work in Hong Kong and food processing in Boston. I thought after a few minutes of talking in English with others in the class about her real work experience and her hopes, structuring our listening and speaking around the textbook, that she was much more able to face her afternoon interview. The next day she said that she hadn't had to speak English after all. The interviewer spoke Chinese. She would have to wait two more weeks for their decision.

A continuing frustration with the talking book was the lack of response I got in general from the slowest students and from others who were just cautious. Their perceived need to get the answer right as the basis of these students' interaction with me, or anyone else for that matter, was making English participation at these times all but impossible for them. And as an irritating complement, there were the three or four men in class whose good-natured, impromptu Cantonese battles over which answers were correct and how to go about forming them were accounting for mind-bending disruption. Chu Gung especially seemed to be uncontrollable. He provided translations without my asking, he got into students' talk, correcting them, and he was loud about it. The other students didn't seem to mind. He is the class comedian. And he is full of crazy fun and chatter that keeps everybody on their toes.

New Ways: Computers

Chu Gung was absent the first day I introduced word processing. I remember because Wan Wu told me they had tried to guess between them when I would finally start, and I suppose Chu Gung guessed wrong. They were very interested in "learning computer," more so than a lot of other students. Chu Gung learned very quickly. He became the class expert with the Macs. He learned which windows to open, how to cut and paste, and became skilled at many things other students couldn't get the hang of. He also took full advantage of the after-class schedule of practice sessions I set up with our VISTA volunteer for using the typing tutorial on the Macs. Consequently he was usually the first to finish typing up a letter or a story and then he would help other students do their typing. In fact he got in the way all the time. I would see him doing the work for Yiu Lam or Su Li as they just sat and watched, but of course I wanted them to try it themselves. Sometimes I had to just pull him away physically.

Chu Gung had other writing or revising to do, but most often I found him wandering around between other students' computers. I spoke to him often, but he didn't change his ways. He managed to do almost all the work I assigned, but only after I had gotten after him repeatedly. He writes sort of carelessly, so the classwork we do to discuss and revise stories after a first draft has been word processed might have a very positive effect on his writing if he would take it seriously, but he has to be pushed into it all the time.

His first real story, completed over two or three days of my insistent prompting, was about Foxwoods Casino. He read his story to the class. Then students asked questions. How often do you go? If you lose a lot, will you cry? Does your family like you to gamble at the casino? How much is a round trip bus ticket from Chinatown? I learned that it's $10 round trip including the buffet and $50 worth of chips. All the men in class lauded the buffet. Roast beef and steak and Chinese dim sum. They all said I should go. I said I would. Chu Gung said he wins at Black Jack 60% of the time.

After a while I came up with a way to make sure everybody could understand and participate in our class revision sessions. When somebody's story had been read to the other students, I invited everyone to write one good question to ask the writer to help him or her extend the writing in the second draft. Yat Mei brings her two-year-old granddaughter to class fairly often. Everybody knew her a little bit, so Yat Mei's story about her had immediate appeal. She read the story quietly, and then the students read it over again to themselves and each wrote a good question about it for Yat Mei. In my notes I mention that it took much more time to accomplish this than I thought it would. Even-

tually all the students participated by writing their questions on the board. Chu Gung had composed three questions and Su Li had five. Chou Kok never got his question actually written down on paper although I waited a long time for him, but later, after much consideration, he voluntarily went to the board and wrote, "How tall is she?" Yat Mei finished responding, but there were more questions about Yat Mei's granddaughter and the ensuing discussion was the most substantial one we had had in English up to that point in our semester. Her granddaughter is an only child and needs a playmate. Daycare issues came up. Yat Mei and family use a $200 a month baby-sitter who is the mother of her daughter's friend.

As I adjusted my approach, developing class discussion around writing by using the blackboard to make clarifications possible, I noticed that it became increasingly important for me to hold back, even though the waiting seemed interminable sometimes. For one thing I found that if I stopped choosing and encouraging individuals to go up to the blackboard to write their questions, they would all do it voluntarily when they were ready. This was not easy sometimes because they were so slow, but it was certainly worth the wait. "Are they cautious or just slow?" I wrote in my notes. The sense of genuine participation I was able to facilitate by just holding off and letting them involve themselves in the substance of the discourse in this way is rare for my classes.

For another thing I learned that it was far better for the sake of the discussion to stop myself from making any corrections at all to the questions as they were written. Jiang and Wan Wu always configured excellent questions and were generally successful at working out the appropriate structure (present perfect, for example) together, interactively from the board. They asked me often about the syntax, but even to fix one word myself or erase a bit of unnecessary verbiage or just touch it up slightly, literally in passing, didn't pay off at all. I got "lots of Chinese discussion almost immediately about form and how the question should be written instead of content. They stop talking to the writer altogether and focus on form." Fortunately I soon learned to control myself.

Facilitating Back and Forth

In the early going I had taught from the book regularly, but by about mid-semester it was becoming increasingly obvious that I wasn't following through enough to be able to make progress to the end as usual. This was scary for me. I knew that students might object silently or feel cheated in some cases. Some students wondered aloud if we could finish. Wan Wu and others asked me to teach them the lesson about relative clauses. I did, using the book and other resources. I also continued to resort to the book at odd moments, mainly for appeasement. Although students enjoyed the projects and valued computer writing at this stage, they were also concerned about what they might be missing otherwise. Still I was excited that students were succeeding in new ways: they were raising critical questions themselves in English; they were writing and reading about their own culture, the one they were living day to day; they were self-correcting, mutually and sometimes comfortably; they were gaining confidence. I was also aware for the first time that if I could extend and raise the discourse a bit more in this class, they might even accept the fact that we wouldn't be able to finish the book. So I continued to go back and forth between old and new ways, but I stayed the course too, happily, in producing a needed project base for literacy work.

Telecommunications became the medium for producing authentic texts in three projects this semester. The first one in February involved answering a smoking survey that a team of four junior high students in Ohio had uploaded to the Internet. There were ten to twelve questions about who smokes, where, school programs to fight smoking and drugs, and what people felt about teenage smoking. This was the first time we had tried using computers for anything. I paired students up to write their answers and then do the word processing together. They worked very well, I thought. It took a couple of days to finish, but I noticed that typing things up together gave them extra opportunities to talk about their writing and make some of their own corrections. I usually ask students to read their writing back to me once they finish typing it. Sometimes they can see their own mistakes. Chu Gung, working with Su Li but doing all the typing himself, found some of his typos this way. He promised to make the corrections right there and then, but he didn't really do it. Since the original survey questions had been numbered, it seemed more appropriate to send them back to Ohio that way, rather than in the paragraph form my students had chosen for their first drafts. It was an opportunity to show them how to use the word processor to separate sentences and move them around. My students picked right up on the new techniques and changed their revised versions into lists of answers to the questions. Then I e-mailed their responses back to the junior high school.

In March students from Amsterdam High School in New York sent us 100 questions. They were preparing for their social studies unit on China. The questions were categorized into politics, religion, culture, food, sports, etc. I let pairs of Semester 5 students write paragraphs on one category at a time. After three rounds we managed to get them back just about in time to satisfy the schedule in Amsterdam. The teacher in

New York said his students were thrilled. About a month later we got a package with 40 letters from the high school kids to my students individually. Some of the letters were genuine, friendly and interested. Conversely, one of Yiu Lam's letters was from five boys who concentrated on describing their preoccupation with drugs. Su Ru got an invitation to "get it on" from a fifteen-year-old boy. Wan Wu was asked about when he first lost his virginity. I asked them to choose one or two letters to read and then write response letters. My students took the content in stride, but reading the letters was difficult for them. Gradually almost everyone wrote and word processed return letters. We have also written a group response with many more questions for Amsterdam students to answer this time, and I will send everything via America On Line soon.

In May we began a series of computer chats after class on Wednesdays with the Pre-Vocational Skills Training Program at AACA in Chinatown. My students are beginning to see that the next step after Quincy School is probably training and maybe even this Pre-Voc program. Although we had all prepared questions about the training class for two of our students to use in the chat, Yiu Lam and Wan Wu never had a chance to ask any of them because they ran into Superwoman, a notorious on-line personality at AACA. Superwoman introduced herself as a single woman who had many children including two sets of twins. This was extremely interesting news for Quincy students. Yiu Lam, doing all the typing, had a lot of fun with this absurdity and Wan Wu had many questions for Superwoman. He was even able to use his newly acquired vocabulary item. He asked her when she had lost her virginity. I captured the text so we could all work from the hard copy in class. The next day Yiu Lam read the log for the class, and explained some of what had transpired over the two hours they had stayed on line. Chu Gung was kicking himself for missing the chat. He insisted he'd be there for next week, and he was. Other students wanted a crack at it too. I felt great because they were really enthusiastic.

Assessment

I passed out my set of assessment questions one Monday morning near the end of the semester and asked students to work in pairs to answer three out of seven of them in paragraph form. Then, partly because I didn't want the students to give me answers that they thought I wanted, I asked their former teacher, who still works with some of the slower students on fundamentals Mondays after class, to go over the assessment sheet with them. Only three of the students attended the after-class session. However their suggestions and some of the written responses are worthy of consideration.

Everybody agreed that it was not okay that we wouldn't finish the book this semester. How could students move up to Semester 6 without finishing the Semester 5 book first? On the other hand many students said they thought computer writing was valuable. Su Li said she had learned enough grammar and vocabulary from this. The group of three suggested that we might take one day a week for computer writing and study the book for the rest of the time. However, they were afraid that some students might stay home on the computer writing day. They said they would come themselves, though. Actually I never had an attendance problem with the morning class. Another of their schemes was to study the book for one hour a day and do computer writing for the last half hour. That way students could stay after class if they wanted to continue working on their projects.

I don't believe that the talking book works very well. I did find that students became actively engaged and had fun doing projects. Therefore I am not inclined to follow the suggestion that we limit project-based literacy work to only about a fourth of our time. In general resistence was much less than I'm used to from students with other class schedules later in the afternoon, after work.

Nevertheless, as some of the morning students mentioned, the book still represents the main source of potential coherence in language study here. Given their sense of the discontinuity in their lives and of the intense pressure to make good, students are caught in a catch-22 situation. They believe in and struggle to find flexibility in the socio-linguistic system. The flexibility of language means that one can communicate successfully even with limited English skills. Flexibility frequently rewards experimentation and risk-taking with understanding. Students also believe, however, that they can learn a set of rules or the book as a guarantee for success. These competing beliefs create a dilemma for the teacher. Unless students see the coherence in flexibility and until they can see how to apply that to their lives as immigrants, it will be hard to bring authentic reading and writing into the classroom. •

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What the Writer Brings to the Teaching of Writing:

Teaching English to Adult ESOL Learners in Boston's Chinatown

Deborah Schwartz

Legitimizing students' voices by bringing to them all the creative and analytical formats of expression we can think of and can imagine is, for me, writer and teacher, at the heart of any substantial writing pedagogy. I believe that much time and effort and research must go toward the development of creating learning centers that rely on the students' narratives, languages, needs, even when they seem to be, and perhaps are, in conflict with the administration's agendas and the teacher's assumptions. Fostering all kinds of expression and modeling the natural connection between the written, spoken and conversational modes should be at the core of each literacy classroom. The long-awaited, buried story of losing one's father or brother or of first passion, a good chicken soup recipe, a rap poem about Harriet Tubman—these written and oral transactions of loss or growth, frustration or pure bliss should be embers in our classrooms that we as teachers habitually set to fire, not unlike the way students, during breaks, reach to light cigarettes.

Too often this serious arena of educational strategizing—the building, demolishing and rebuilding of the narrative of the classroom, one that relies on a shared and shifting dialogue, teacher to student, student to student, classroom to community to agency—is considered a sometimes helpful, usually coincidental by-product of kind teaching. In fact, working to pull out and examine students' voices through various types of writing exercises—collective essay writing, poetry reading/writing projects, in-class surveys that examine the daily role that writing plays in the students' first language, ongoing dialogue and free-writing journals, book-making, and whole language grammar exercises, these among many other types of writing projects and activities—have been, for me, the most complex, rewarding and demanding aspect of teaching first or second language usage.

It is no wonder that in teaching the writing process to many kinds of adult and young adult learners—young men who have just left gangs, working-class community college students in Lynn, thirteen-year-old Hebrew school students in Newton, and, most recently, Chinese immigrants in Boston's Chinatown—I return over and over to the poet, the fiction writer in me, that daily sits myself down to face the page, the blinking ugly screen, hoping, negotiating, how to let happen the words and the structures themselves that allow and give home to the voices which come pouring out and help me make meaning of myself and my world. In many ways, the experience of writing, daily, and of teaching writing, daily, captures the parts greater than the sum of my teaching experience. The act of writing solo, or in a classroom, is nothing less then the act of creation and transformation, and that, however seemingly dangerous, is what I want from my teaching.

Writing though, is also a discipline. And it often demands a product. What can we gain from it, we wonder? We know what we need from it sometimes—a GED, a project to be funded, a reply to a request, and so on. And while those kinds of written documents that generate tangible things are important professional tools for us and our students, I am most interested in looking at and seeing the other face of writing, the thing less often talked about. For those of us who practice this other kind of writing, like some of us practice praying, or making families, or building community, or building buildings, writing becomes one means of seeking out that which haunts you. For the thing you are seeking, seeks you too, and if you are not haunted by it, humored by it, hating it, ignoring it, courting it, flirting with it; if you are not willing to sustain the questions and problems it asks of you; if it is not changing you,

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then you are doing something other than writing.

The question then becomes for me, writer and teacher: Do we want to be changed by writing, and to have our students be changed by their writing, even if we don't yet know how that change will happen and where it will bring us? If the answer is yes, then we must look at how best to nurture the kind of environment that will allow that kind of writing and creating, thinking and feeling to happen.

The following essay, which includes lesson plans, reflections on the teaching of writing as a writer and examples of students' work, is a collage that has a blood-colored line running through it. As we learn how to play piano from the masters and our own inner ear, and as we learn how to fish from fisherman and the underwater movements and intelligences of the damn smart fish, we too learn about writing from writers and from the practice of being writers ourselves.

The Students' Presence—A Base To Build On Without Which There Is No Story

> In addition to treating curriculum as a narrative whose interests must be uncovered and critically interrogated, radical teachers must create pedagogical conditions in their classrooms that allow different student voices to be heard and legitimized. —*H. Giroux*

There are many ways to legitimize students' voices and honor students' specific canons of knowledge during lessons. I believe, however, that the central method of doing that begins with respect for the student, whoever he or she may be, a respect based in the understanding that, because that student has already lived a full and complete life, he or she is already "learned" and able to construct his or her own stories and perceptions located within particular historical happenings. It is these narratives—these stories that sometimes take the form of journal entries or letters or essays or lists or student-written and -produced books or even poems, written expressions of all kinds— that create the room, both literal and figurative, to explore history or explain English grammar or teach appropriate and correct job interviewing skills. For when I try to teach isolated skills or facts, without pulling out the experiences of my students in relation to these bodies of knowledge, my classroom feels hollow and empty. When I fall back on skill-based teaching, it is as if my students forget that they are in the class to learn a language and not to be the subject of some strange form of punishment for not knowing English perfectly.

Just recently, I built a two-to-three-day lesson around various uses of the verb "would," including the conditional mode and how to use "would" to express preference. I thought my students and I could use a respite from the previous weeks of high-density writing work. Beginning with my own examples of the conditional and also some from grammar textbooks, I then asked the students for some of their own sentences. The class looked at me with that constipated, we're-trying-to-but-we-can't-do-it-look. That's when I thought I should move into the verbal question/answer part of the exercise. At least then I was relying on the students' own creative answers to a preformatted teacher question. Simple, I thought.

I would ask each student, one at time: "Where are you now?" They would reply: "I am in the classroom." I would then ask that student: "Where would you prefer to be?" She or he would answer "at home" or "at the circus" or "back in China"—wherever each person wished most to be.

At first, it was a bit confusing to explain because most of my students hadn't internalized the basic idea of the verb "to be." Therefore that preliminary, yet difficult grammar lesson took quite a lot of examples and actual analysis to grasp.

Together the class decided that the verb "to be" was good for two things—explaining where you are or were or, in this case, wished to be, or describing aspects of yourself or another person. These descriptions of the most fundamental of all verbs were related to one's identity and location. Things were working for the time being, I thought. The substance of this grammar lesson seemed to emerge as a natural outgrowth of the previous lessons about identity and all its possible, and sometimes complicated, contradictory and context-bound sensibilities, though the larger problem or question being posed to me by the learners was how to imagine and express preference.

When I finally dished out the questions, asking for students' preferences, the first three students answered, like clockwork: "I would prefer to be in English class." Now the fun kicked in for me as teacher, researcher, investigator, facilitator—what was it they were doing with this conjugation and did they want to learn how to use it appropriately in this culturally-defined social setting?

I offered them highly dramatic and personal examples as to where I would prefer to be: the beach, a movie, at home reading a book, out for dinner at China Pearl, on a two-week vacation in Milan, Italy, with my girlfriend. These answers made them laugh and modeled permission for them to articulate an urge to be elsewhere. Still, the whole class insisted that here, in class, learning English, was exactly where they wanted to be.

Now there was some student-based content, substance, plot to this grammar lesson. And I wondered, was it considered disrespectful for them to articulate

that they would prefer to be somewhere else and that therefore, logically, they weren't enjoying where it was that they were? Or were they just so eager to learn English that nothing else mattered? Or were they actually enjoying themselves more then they could imagine? Although the lesson technically collapsed in on itself, there now was a way to save the conditional. "There is no place I would rather be," I wrote on the board. Then after the smiles of satisfaction, nods and interludes in Chinese that secured the learning of this funny sentence, my newer student from Iran looked at me, shook her head and said aloud, to the whole class, "There are many other places I would rather be! I would rather be in a coffee shop, drinking coffee."

Eventually, after that student's sharing of some of her favorite coffee shops in Tehran, and my doing the same for Starbucked Boston, I opened up the conversation for the whole class and watched it become a discussion about drinking coffee and lemonade and other strange American leisure customs. Only one or two of the students drank coffee regularly, and most of the students had never even tried it. The excitement was building and, by class consent, we tromped over to the nearby Au Bon Pain and finished the English lesson there.

Each student was asked to use "would" or "could" once during their conversation with the cashier and then to document the interaction. The assignment became alive while the context of the grammar lesson was the actual experience of doing something "American."

The memory that is most pronounced for me is of a group of six students huddled by the coffee bar, asking other customers for help distinguishing between "Coffee of the Day" and "Columbian Roast". (I even overheard one or two "would's" and "could's" pop up in the students' questions). Some customers annoyingly shook their heads and walked away; others graciously and carefully explained what they knew of these two blends. At one point, a student dragged over an American woman holding a baby who was introduced to me as "another English teacher!" I knew they were using their English and felt good doing it.

The whole time I stood nearby at the check-out counter, offering to treat students who didn't expect to have to spend money during class. Only one woman took me up on the offer and at 6:30 pm, fifteen minutes after the class was scheduled to end, I ran out of the Au Bon Pain to get back to teach my late night class. I left my students seated around tables, drinking milky, sweet coffee and cold lemonades with straws, talking and laughing in both English and Chinese.

Even though it can make for a sense of the chaotic, I try, and not always successfully, to trust that, not unlike when I am writing a story or learning a new idea, I can't help but rely on my own experience, context, schema as a means to understand the information I am trying to grasp. Rather than give up on a particular lesson because it doesn't engage or excite my students, I hope, rather, to be able to notice what is going on in the classroom at that very moment of alienation and/or boredom. I hope to really observe, the way a poet observes, the silence, or the one bit of fragmented discussion, to pull out the core lesson, the text, from the constantly changing and rich subtext that is always being revealed to me in my students' silence or dissatisfaction or laughter. And though I, too, am part of that narrative, and play a particularly important role, including the superimposition of skills and materials that I want to cover, it is my students' perceptions and rendering of the material that I feed them—including sometimes the complete rejection of it—that makes for the actual learning-happenings.

For example, in the described grammar exercises, the question became for me, the teacher, how could my students integrate the construct of preference, if they first couldn't articulate what they imagined they would like to do?

I am slowly learning to listen to that informative instructional voice, the one that pulls at my shirt collar and asks: "Where are your students' stories and histories and desires in all this that you are giving them? Is it at the center of your lessons? On the sidelines? Or absent entirely?" Needless to say, over the past few years of lesson planning, as I am guided by these questions, I try not only to answer them with my students, but also to get students to ask the questions of themselves. These days I seem to be constantly and meticulously renegotiating or redrafting curriculum as I am teaching it. The lessons don't happen, so to speak, until my students become part of the decision-making about the material and the methods. This method of pulling out and honing down what is at the core of the moment's happening is surprisingly like fiction writing. Novel-making, for instance, relies on sustained nourishment of character voices located among emerging themes and images that, if held together properly, show the writer and the reader a new way of seeing an old world differently.

The Creation of an Evolving Narrative

> When you bring the dramatis personae into writing, all sorts of debates and arguments and positions and stages of growth come into play. I am sometimes surprised. It's a way of sustained problematizing for me, writing novels...The man who goes back and forth across the lake every day without consequence is lucky. But it is when he sinks that the

novelist steps in.—*Toni Morrison (from an interview in* Humanities, *vol.17, no.1, March/ April 1996)*

Often I find that my students' role in the overall creation of the classroom narrative is not as overt nor self-conscious an act as when I create voice and narrative in my own writing. When I write for and about characters, I must know them so intimately that they teach me things that no one else can teach me. In fact, this view corresponds directly with Morrison's own reflections about the novelist's basic motivation for creating in the first place. I write to find out, to search, to see, to be awed and excited by the journey and to exorcise an inexhaustible number of questions. What the fiction writing process demands is that the writer open up narrative space for the voices that have something to say, the voices that are characterizations of the imagined but, indeed, for those of us who believe, are the voices of many different kinds of truths.

In the classroom, because I need to hear from my students, who are hopefully not characters in my head, but who too have voices that need to be brought up from the underground world of subtext, I typically begin and end each semester with a collection of tools designed to elicit the particular needs and stories of my students. I use this information as the building blocks of my lesson planning and curriculum.

Again, not unlike when I begin a writing project, I come to the beginning of a semester's teaching armed with strategies to draw out voice: writing and reading surveys, questionnaires and stories about other stu-

Beginning of the Semester Writing/Reading Survey

1. What do you like to read in English? (Newspapers? Magazines? TV Guide? Advertisements? Letters? Poetry? Novels?)
2. When you read in English to yourself, do you like to read quietly or aloud?
3. What do you do when you come across a word you don't know?
4. Do you like to have other people read aloud to you in English?
5. Do you like to have other people read aloud to you in your first language?
6. Do you like to read aloud to others? To whom do you read and in which language(s)?
7. Do you care if there's noise around you when you read?
8. Which movies and or TV shows have you recently viewed? Were any of them in English?
9. On which occasions do you write in English? (Letters? School assignments? Applications?)
10. When do you speak in English and with whom?
11. What kinds of writings would you like to read in English in this class? Why?
12. What other kinds of writings have you enjoyed reading in other classes?

End of the Semester Writing/Reading Survey

1. What's the first thing you do, when I hand you a new piece of in-class reading?
2. What have you enjoyed reading in this class? Why?
3. What are a few of the ways you can figure out a word you don't know? What's your favorite way of figuring out a word you don't know?
4. In class, do you care if there's noise around you when you are reading?
5. Have you recently viewed any TV shows or movies in English? Which ones?
6. When do you use spoken English?
7. When do you write in English?
8. What kinds of English writings do you prefer to do? (Letters? Class assignments? Phone messages?)
9. What kinds of writing do you do for practical purposes, to get something done?
10. What kinds of writing do you do for expressive purposes, just because you have something to say?
11. What is the first thing you do, when you get a writing assignment? The second? The third?
12. Do you prefer homework that involves writing, or homework that doesn't?
13. What are your most favorite topics to write about? Has that changed?
14. On a scale of 1-5, how important is it for you to learn how to write down your ideas in English?
15. On a scale of 1-5, how important is it for you to be comfortable thinking in English?
16. On a scale of 1-5, how important is it for you to learn how to "write perfectly in English"?
17. What does "writing perfectly in English" mean to you?

dents' educational goals and the settings in which they did or didn't fulfill them, to name a few. (See the "Beginning of the Semester Writing/Reading Survey" and the "End of the Semester Writing/Reading Survey" included here.) Sometimes this is enough to begin with; other times it's a false start, but always it is informative, teaching me about how students perceive themselves in relation to their rights as learners. Besides, students' voices don't always come in the discourse that I am familiar with nor do they always speak in the languages that I even know. My role as teacher asks for good management skills—not unlike the times when my characters wake me up in the middle of night and demand that I feed them all kinds of strange foods in exchange for their stories and words and, eventually, some sleep. For another shift in my approach to teaching, which I have certainly learned from my writing, is to neither freak out at nor ignore the times my class shifts into its first language of discourse, whatever it may be.

Very often, when the class turns into a Chinese-speaking one, it happens because my students are excited, engaged and filled up with the power of generating their own narratives. In fact, if I am asking my students to voice themselves, to express themselves comfortably and authentically, I should, at some point, expect that they will move back into their first and most fluent tongue. Mostly I give in and work hard to help my students become cognizant of when and why they move into their first language, to slow down their usage enough to monitor and learn from it, to in fact analyze their own language use and acquisition. And then I try to facilitate their minds' movement back around into English, all the time hoping to retain and build on the level of interest and comfort that they first expressed in Chinese.

Through the whole translation and decoding process, I am honest with them about my intentions and continually stop the flow of conversation so that they too can reflect on what they hope to accomplish by the end of the lesson. By asking myself and my students the kinds of refining and drawing-out questions I am trained to ask, as both an educator and a writer who daily must pull out the core of the argument or question in my own work, I attempt to pull through the content of the conversation and ask the class to define the center and shape of the ideas which are being formed in discussion.

I help students chart their own ideas and help them recognize how powerful and accessible a skill thinking is; I help draft their ideas into speaking, writing and reading maps—discussions, essays, questions that lead to further readings, discussions and essays. I know something about this creative process and its uncomfortable and sometimes unknowable terrains, because I encounter it in my own writing. I also know from growing up in a house where my mother and father broke into Yiddish when something was heated or secret or political or related to issues of discipline and family that, when people are comfortable and full of feeling and thought, they often break out into the language and/or discourse of first expression.

Some say this conversion into the mother tongue is a regression or a sign of pre-literate English. Perhaps, but whatever it tells about the learner's relationship to English, it also points to the essential truth that the code-switching itself is a manifestation of engaged language usage and thought. An equally important realization for my development as a second language teacher, has been the understanding that what often looks like the students' complete disregard for English can be an opportunity for me to facilitate a conversation in the still-foreign currency of English. In turn, this new piece of the story often becomes something that is beyond all of our wildest dreams.

As the English teacher, it is precisely my job to help them slow down, analyze and get at the heart of the argument in the language that they are learning how to think in. And the more complex the ideas, the more translation they and I will have to do. In fact, a big part of their work, as increasingly bilingual people, consists of becoming cognizant of where their capabilities in one language end and where their skills in the other language begin.

Though I plan my lessons carefully with attention to many different kinds of skill-based activities, I have found that if I am truly interested in satisfying the classes' urge and need to teach and learn, I must block out periods of "surprise time." These days, I allow and encourage pauses and spaces in my own teaching materials for the students' voices and stories to emerge at their own pace and in their own ways.

One such place where I ask my students to build their own personal relationship with both me and their own writing mind is in a weekly in-class writing dialogue journal. This forum demands that the students fill up pages and pages with their own thoughts, questions and stories, that they learn how to develop a relationship to their own writing in English.

Another method of drafting student-centered and student-generated lesson plans is to use their writings as materials which can be reorganized into thematic and grammar-based lessons. I especially love looking at the connections between written content and the structure of the pieces which some writers say defines the writer's style. I, of course, share my insights and reflections with my students; and as they become more trained in noticing organically-shaped word and sentence patterns, they too share their unique insights with me. Certainly in some classes that is easier to do.

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Sometimes I am handed crumbs of writing, other times gold pieces. The trick is to try to get at the meaning of the student's writing, its style, content and grammar, and allow that often tender thread of narrative to weave itself into the next lesson, while all the time being amazed at the surprise of the product.

The Role of the Surprise in Making Meaningful Narrative

One day I found my class in the middle of a discussion about whether or not to celebrate the Chinese New Year in the U.S. The reading material that triggered the discussion was a newspaper article written in English for the local bilingual Chinese newspaper *Sampan.*

During mid-reading of the article what sounded like a huge debate broke out. Everyone was speaking at once in Chinese and there was real emotion and charge to the conversation; a debate was ensuing as to the importance of celebrating the Chinese New Year in America. I wanted to be part of the conversation A) because I was interested in my students' ideas and lives, and B) because I knew I could help them further express their ideas and document them.

Initially one student translated for me, and then she too, moved by the intensity of the arguments, positioned herself back into the action which was happening, whether I liked it or not, in Chinese. I would have to facilitate the discussion back into English, and, more importantly, I would have to slow down the ball of fire that was growing in the classroom so that it could be examined and, if we were lucky, expressed in an essay format.

I know that if you plan the argument thoughtfully, building it within a ring of rocks, using solid dry kindling, and leaving lots of room for oxygen, you will have one big fire without burning down the forest. I wanted to show this class the power of the written essay not just as a forum in which to express themselves in English, but as a tool to deepen their thoughts about immigration, assimilation and culture, as a vessel that could contain the passion of the argument and that could expand and clarify the ideas being expressed within it.

I had not planned the first semester around topics of immigration and acculturation and had treaded lightly on pulling forth my students' own stories. However, over time and in the context of other kinds of lessons about health and healing, job issues (such as how they could find one and how to negotiate language and race discrimination once they did), and American literature (including the literature of Asian immigrants), and, of course, in their slowly emerging dialogue journals, I learned pieces of individual stories without using immigration as a central text. I went slowly with them into their own stories, taking my cues from the students' own interests and from their silences.

Silence, I believe, has as much to do with voice as does speaking. I am conscious of the one man or woman in class who does not speak about his wife or her husband, who grows quiet at the mention of dating and gender roles, who sits dumbfounded when asked about a weekend experience. For one of the many and multiple identities that sometimes I wear like clothes or tapestries, that other times sits comfortably at peace between my breastbones, and yet at other moments runs through my bloodstream so that I am no more conscious of it than of the quiet beatings of my heart, I own the identity of being a Lesbian. And I walk through the world as one. Sometimes, sitting through staff meetings, acquaintances' dinners, whole semesters and years of teaching to adults whom I care about but for a myriad of reasons am often unable to come out to, I feel the weight of silence.

Through the burden and gift of this particular identity that really sums up very little of who I am, but carries such great weight, I have learned a particular interest in the nuances of silence and being silenced by others. I have also grown more capable at generating spaces, environments, on the page, in my classroom and in my heart that allow for difference of pace, experience and expression. So although I had not ignored the obvious and central theme of immigration for my students, I also wanted to respect their trepidation, at least until I knew more about the reasons for the quiet.

Little by little, all the while taking my cues from the students, I asked these students to risk reading, writing and thinking about America's history of immigration and their own too.

At first, I fed them bits of others' writing about immigration, and we did a unit on contemporary American fiction that began with the opening chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Man.* I also asked them to join a student-writing e-mail list of adult English learners throughout the world. Given that our first assignment was to write a local and international news report that seemed significant to the students, and I was wondering how we would write anything so structured and fact-based, I had my own agenda in directing the explosive dialogue that was taking place about the Chinese New Year.

So, I had been slowly learning about the students' life stories, sometimes through their writing in their journals, class discussions, or individual conferences, but mostly by getting to know them as people. And because there was a task at hand—namely, to compose a report about world and/or local news—that day's heated conversation, culminating from months of work and wait, became the basis for one of their most

authentic and multi-layered writing projects.

Here's what happened. First, one student translated the basic argument for me into English, defining the terms of the conflict: whether or not to celebrate the Chinese New Year in the U.S. Then, after unsuccessfully trying to facilitate a whole-class discussion in English, I decided to ask particular members of the class to explain how the New Year was celebrated in China. Then, as part of a more general discussion, the students offered up the ways they were celebrating the New Year here in the U.S. By concentrating on and defining the concrete elements of the argument, I was asking my students to detail the specifics of how life was different for them here. The class flew by and we were left with a document, more like an annotated list, of New Year rituals.

For homework, I asked each student to copy down the general class list and to revise it by adding more details to the parts of the celebration they participated in. During the next few classes, the argument kept going round and round in circles. Finally, I broke the class into two groups so that each member of each group could receive reinforcement of their ideas, rather than having to refine their thoughts only in opposition to one another as they had in the previous class period. This was the second revision exercise, and I conducted it in a more communal mode.

Each subgroup, now defined as for or against celebrating the Chinese New Year in the U.S., was asked to expand on the ways in which the holiday was celebrated by various members in the group and to compose a sentence or two that argued why or why not this celebration was appropriate, useful, or meaningful. The result was that each group wrote two or more body paragraphs.

I spent time with each group, helping them to detail their general thoughts, correct particular grammar errors, recognize their syntactical decisions, and eventually write unifed and logical paragraphs. I typed up each group's work on separate sheets and exchanged the sheets so that each group could edit the other's. This editing exercise generated more discussion and further refinement of both the content and the mechanics of the growing comparison/contrast essay. Together, on huge sheets of poster paper, the students literally dictated the introduction to me.

For the final lesson, I explained the intention of a conclusion—how it not only reiterated the points made in the introduction and body of the essay, but also further spoke to or questioned the topic at hand. The last paragraph flew fluently out of the mouths of two or three members of the class, while again I acted as the dictation machine. These two or three students' opinions represented both sides of the argument. Meanwhile, other students would jump in, correcting grammar or making editorial comments, all of which I incorporated into the first draft of the essay. After typing up the first draft, I asked each student to copy edit, and using their corrections, I typed up a final draft, which is included here (see next page).

This essay is an original and authentic tribute to the Chinese New Year, full of possible themes and ideas for readers to further explore in discussion or in their own writings. Bedrocked within the written lines are such themes as differing and conflicting work ethics, analysis of the economic situation for immigrants, and varying spiritual and cultural practices. Because it is vibrant and thoughtful writing, there are also language patterns to explore, rich assortments of words and thoughts, whether structural (paragraphing, transitions, introductions and closures, theme articulations and argument tactics), mechanical (syntactic choices and errors, verb tense and person agreements and usage, punctuation), or poetic (image and metaphor usage, voice and tone, mood and the emergence of visual, rhyme and rhythm patterns).

I believe that the evidence of this essay's usefulness and completeness is defined by how it pleases and humors the reader and how it can be used as a springboard for further language discussion and exploration. Also the writing process and ultimate publication of the essay allowed my students to articulate their varying and incongruous ideas, including some students' dislocation from both their own community and from the culture at large. This essay does capture the complexity and depth of my students' immigrant experience, but of equal importance, and perhaps indicative of the way writing works, it was the actual process of giving words to ideas and feelings that in and of itself was the transformative act for me, my students and perhaps other members of the Chinatown community of English readers outside the classroom.

In a very specific and tangible way this essay catalyzed discussion between the two groups within the class. The writing of the essay opened a door to dialogue about a universal and yet taboo subject—that of feeling alienated within one's own community. Though not expressed explicitly in the text, students offered much attentiveness, support and good will to each other. In a number of cases students became each other's teachers, helping to midwife words and ideas that were hard to birth.

For instance, the groups of students who felt that the New Year was too painful and/or nostalgic to celebrate, having found themselves in a new country where they were overworked, underpaid and alone, were often encouraged to speak about these feelings and experiences by other students who did or didn't find themselves in the same position.

Without consciously asking for student feedback

Celebrating Chinese New Year

We are a class of all Chinese adult students. We are discussing the Chinese New Year and how we celebrate it. We think this is both local and international news because it's about how we celebrate it here in Chinatown, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, and about how Chinese people celebrate it in China and all over the world. Our teacher says that it's cultural news, but still news.

Some people in class don't celebrate New Year and some people do. But first we will tell you a little bit about the Chinese New Year. On February 19th, 1996, we celebrate the Year of the Rat. We have twelve animals going around in the cycle. It is a lunar calendar based on the moon's changes. It is complicated to explain and there are many interpretations. There are books and books written about each month, each year, and each person's fortune for the year, but that is another story.

First, we will hear from the classmates who think we should celebrate the Chinese New Year:

We are Chinese. Chinese New Year is our traditional spring festival. We should follow it. On New Year's Day, people let the old things and bad things pass away and receive the good things. They desire all the good things to begin in the New Year. Also, it is our responsibility to pass our traditional customs and culture to our children. Finally, many family members can share their happiness together in the New Year because on other days they are too busy working. People can visit their relatives and friends to exchange news, gifts and good luck greetings. Here are some of the ways people celebrate the Chinese New Year, both here and in China: buy flowers; make special food like deep fried sesame balls, steamed turnip cakes, soups, wine, fried dumplings and vegetarian foods; give lucky money to children and unmarried people in red envelopes (red symbolizes good luck); buy new clothes; pray to Buddha, gods/goddesses and ancestors for happiness and health by burning incense and putting out apples and oranges and a whole cooked chicken which later the family will eat; listening and watching firecrackers and fireworks; playing mah-jong; dancing; singing karoke; and visiting relatives.

Celebrating Chinese New Year is important because it reminds us that Spring is coming and it is the time to pray for luck and safety for our families. It is very important to celebrate Chinese New Year in the U.S. because it helps us to keep our culture.

When we first started writing about how we celebrate the New Year in the United States of America, we learned that some of the people in class did not celebrate it. Here is what they said:

Some of us don't like to celebrate the Chinese New Year because many people don't have any time to celebrate it. They have to work on those days, and they want to save money. People spend too much to celebrate the New Year because they feel as if the New Year will benefit them. We should use this money to do some benevolences. It would be better. Besides in China, some people give gifts thinking they'll get something better back. This is ridiculous! Finally, many of us are alone here in the U.S.; we do not have any relatives with us, and celebrating the holiday makes us homesick.

In conclusion, we think this is an interesting question that all immigrants must ask. All Chinese people consider the New Year as the most important festival in their mind. But whether to celebrate it depends on people's situations. We should make our generation remember the Chinese New Year because we are the people of the Dragon, which means we are like Royalty. In our actions, we can't always celebrate the New Year, but we do in our hearts and minds.

about the writing of this essay, I cannot assume that the writing process "changed them." However, from my perspective as teacher and facilitator, I did notice that the writing project gave students who were usually silent and cynical a chance to express their sentiments and analyze them carefully within an actively supportive framework—the classroom. And I might add that the humor and honesty of these words changed the mood of the classroom for good. After we sent off the essay via e-mail to be read by a network of internationally-placed adult English learners and then later published the essay in the agency's New Year's edition newsletter, the class became a cohesive whole woven together by individual and small-group voices and opinions.

Now, students could feel comfortable voicing criticisms, half-thoughts and ironies; they were learning the skills of actively listening and eliciting verbal truths

from one another. I had the pleasant sensation of watching the class yawn and stretch, becoming more and more awake, and I knew anything was possible.

Highlighting a Particular Student's Writing to Further Create Drama and Narrative in the Classroom

Quite recently, I began an end of the semester assessment of my students' progress, needs and further goals. It included revisiting the same student surveys that I had originally used to procure lesson objectives and ideas for reading material at the beginning of the semester. I have always dreamed about integrating an ongoing student-based assessment and evaluation tool that would be the primary vehicle in which to drive the curriculum forward. How amazed I was at the level of sophistication at which the students answered questions about how they liked or disliked various reading materials, themes and teaching pedagogies and approaches. Students were learning, finally, why their opinions were important in the classroom, especially when it came to what they were or weren't learning.

The class that produced the comparison/constrast essay on the pros and cons of celebrating the Chinese New Year in the U.S. also produced pages and pages of individual and communal documentation about their own reading, writing and learning goals, and how their goals had changed throughout the course of the two four-month semesters. Students talked and wrote about the importance of writing as a means to and as evidence for their ongoing learning of English. And, of course, students asked for more "practical" uses of English, including more "how to" survival lessons, i.e. how to make phone calls, how to talk to doctors, and how to apply for jobs. I responded immediately to their requests, pleased that they were charting out their own plans based on their own needs.

One successful writing and speaking exercise culminated in the creation of a research packet compiled by the students themselves. In this listing, each student was responsible for finding out all kinds of detailed information about one particular academic, vocational and/or language program to further their education. This demanded preliminary phone calls, visits and appointments to each site. Sheets of informational questions were generated in class, and some in-class time was spent actually calling programs. I had no idea that a number of my students had never made a phone call in English, let alone how few of them knew how to use the information directory "411" when they couldn't find a phone number.

At the same time that my students asserted their needs to learn more functional English, they also articulated their desires to express their own narratives in more unique and aesthetically satisfying ways. They were asking me to help them write their life stories, and they craved others' stories as well.

I began with immigration narratives that were written and collected in a beautiful and accessible booklet produced by Xiaowei He, Shenyu Belsky and the peer-tutors of our own TAG peer-tutoring program. Slowly I redirected the writings toward more formal texts, including some of the published work collected in an ESOL text entitled *Then and Now,* newly issued by St. Martin's Press.

The student essay included here (see next page) was first generated in the midst of the class' first round of reading and writing about immigration. I love this writing because it is written with such a sense of self-awareness and because at the core of this narrative is the strong, emerging and compassionate voice of my student. I love this work because it centralizes the student's language issues in the context of being an immigrant, and because it bravely articulates what many of my students feel and experience. But mostly I love it because the student, Sui Hung Lam, handed me pages and pages of rough draft one day after class, out of her own initiative and not out of the general line of classroom assignment. Her essay still surprises both of us.

The transformative power of this writing exercise lies not only in the way it affected the writer, but how it generated others in the class to write their own stories and to see their positions as new immigrants in highly politicized terms. Still, though, I contend that writing does not have to specifically speak to an audience and demand tangible political change in order to transform both the reader and the writer of the work. As a poet, I know the power of language on its own terms and how language in itself can move people, ideas, thoughts and worlds, sometimes in ways unforeseeable.

When Poetry Creeps into the Classroom and Blooms: Creating the Conditions for Students to Become Creative Writers

> Watching the moon
> at dawn,
> solitary, mid-sky,
> I knew myself completely,
> no part left out.
> —*Izumi Shikibu*

This poem, written during Japan's Heian Era by the female Imperial Court poet Izumi Shikibu (974?-1034?), and translated and anthologized by Jane Hirshfield in her collection entitled *The Ink Dark Moon,* captures the essential revelatory experience of poetry making. The writing calls for the poem's persona to be defined and disclosed only within the

moment in which the moon, the self, and the poet's words for both, are brought together within the poem. Also, for me, the poem asks that I, the reader, look into the sky to see myself, also present and "complete." Though the poem is simply built, it has running through it layers and layers of crisscrossed mirrors pointed in all directions, revealing all sorts of whole, superimposed images. The language is the vehicle by which self-revelation happens here, and, even in its translation, it is so perfect, I can't help but want to see what the poem shows me.

Not all students want or need to look that carefully and specifically at what language can do when given rein. And even as a poet myself, though one not as

Overcoming the Language Barrier
by Sui Hung Lam

On March 1st, 1990, my husband, my sons Shing, 11 years old, Ho, 6 years old, and I, immigrated to the United States from Hong Kong. I said "goodbye" to my relatives and friends, "goodbye" to my native town, and I cried. I did not know when I would come back to visit them and to get warm sunshine from my native land.

On this day at nine o'clock at night, I arrived in Boston. Even though this was spring time, the weather was very cold. But even colder than the weather was my heart in my body. I did not know the future: I was scared and alone.

English is the American language. I am Chinese. Chinese was my only language. Anyway, I had to look for a job. I went to some company to ask. They shook their heads. They did not like workers who did not understand English. My friend has a full time job and a part time job. She let me replace the part time job. The part time job was working at a Chinese Dim Sum restaurant. On this day, I prepared my dress and speech so that I could impress the boss and get the job.

After I worked an hour at the restaurant busing the tables, the boss knew that I couldn't speak any English. He was unhappy. He did not like me either. He told me to go home and said, "No pay!" I was very sad. I understand no employer likes to hire an employee who does not understand and speak English.

A few days later, I went to the Marriott Hotel to look for a housekeeping position. But I could not answer the questions in English. The manager told me to study some English then come back again. I had to learn some English in a month. I studied a bit of English in a short time. I went to the interview again. I was fortunate. They gave me a chance. I was hired. I did not know how to describe my happiness. I just knew I did not have to worry about my life in the future. I said, "thank you so much," immediately to them because I did not want them to change their mind. Even though I got a job in English, my language still embarrassed me. The first day I went to work there was a meeting and tour of the hotel. The supervisor introduced the hotel to us and took us around. I did not understand anything they said. I thought I must follow the group so that I would not get lost. They kept walking on. I did too. They stopped. I did too. Finally, the people went into the restroom. I did too. The men looked at me and pointed. The men showed me the picture of a man on the door. Then I understood. This was the men's bathroom. I felt very shy and embarrassed.

The next day, I started to work. I learned that I should be careful to knock on the door to each room and say, "Housekeeping."

"Come back," the guest said out loud from inside. "Come back" sounded like "complain." I panicked. I thought I did nothing wrong. Why was the guest mad at me and complaining about me? Maybe they did not like Chinese people. It was difficult to find this job. Now I would lose it. I was afraid again.

One time, the manager talked about something to me and I did not understand. She called someone in to translate for me. I was surprised. The translator said: "You had to understand English to get this job. Why do you need me to translate for you?" Since this incident, I have decided to study English to overcome my language barrier. I want to improve my life and give a good impression to American people.

During these six years, it has been hard to study English. Now I am very happy. I can listen and speak English. Also I can write this short essay in English to explain my thinking and doing. No American will say to me, "You are deaf and dumb." Finally, I want my essay to be read by government people so that they will know how important it is to keep ESL programs going for new immigrants. Today I can write this story of my life and speak English because of this program. And for new immigrants, they have to learn English to improve their lives and it's hard to do. I hope my story will help them.

masterful as the women of the ancient Imperial Court of Japan, I cannot always afford the kind of time and commitment that working language into poetry demands. Sometimes I, too, feel poetry is off limits in the way that it demands such perfection and royal treatment. The funny thing, though, is that the more I try to stay away from the teaching of poetry in the GED, ABE and ESOL classroom because I believe that all I can do for the useful production of poetry is help create the right conditions for it to happen, it still manages naturally and without pretense to come through the open window like a disoriented bird. And when it does fly in, then the best I can hope for is that I am able to help the student to nurture the living thing back to flight.

This is not to say that there aren't teaching methods and structures that are intended to and are quite successful in generating poetry. I have been both a student and a teacher at just such workshops. Ultimately, though, as in all of my teaching, but especially in the places of the student's most vulnerable realms—written, creative expression—I have to listen to their desires and their reservations, even if they aren't used to knowing and listening to either one of them. Because I am rarely asked by my literacy students to please teach them poetry, I seldom find myself creating plans to do so. In fact, I have found that students from various backgrounds, classes, races, countries, languages have not been offered access to the riches that poetry and poetic expressive language could offer them, and they have not yet developed a taste for its salty-sweetness.

For poetry, perhaps more than any other form of writing, has been mistaught, abused and objectified. Really, like love or good food, it is there for us—a gift, nothing more and certainly nothing less. No wonder almost everyone I know, my students and family and friends alike, think that the ability to write poetry is something that, like good teeth, you are born with. Or that the writing of poetry is something to be taught to people who really will never Be Poets, but can benefit from its medicine, like a laxative that loosens whatever it is that's blocking them from writing in the first place. The red flag goes up when I hear those comments. Hazard lights flash in a storm! Do you want to let a poem put you in a state or make you look at the world through dizziness for the whole day, or do you not?, I want to ask. Poetry is in itself language that demands to be an agent of transformation to the writer and reader. And because such change doesn't always come with road maps, or even good luck charms, you have to be willing and wanting, and in the mood.

Needless to say, when a colleague stopped me in the hall on his way to class, asking me, "Do you have any hints on teaching poetry?," I hesitated, swallowed hard and said, "Yes, I have a whole curriculum on it."

I tried to give him a few hints: "Write with them, whatever you do," which is always my first rule of thumb. He shrugged, "I'm not a poet."

"Well imagine how intimidated they feel," I tried. Another shrug.

"OK. Well, I always show them accessible but what I consider good poetry so that they can become acquainted with the genre."

He had to go teach his poetry class, and I had to go teach about job interviewing. But Fate, the third muse, unraveled the whole thing when an invitation to read student-generated poetry beckoned both me and my colleague. He found his own way to teach the genre, employing silly and fun haiku which he surfed for and found on the Internet. I, heartened by his success, taught poetry the way I know how.

We started with a dip into three Chinese masters, translated, mostly for me, into English. Then I showed them a photograph of a blooming peach tree somewhere in mountainous China. This worked. They, of course, knew more about the references than I, including a whole folk myth of a beautiful virgin maiden who saved the Chinese people by marrying the enemy king and who, after a happy and fulfilling life, was finally buried in the place that the photograph was taken. From there, my students described what they actually saw in the photo. I then moved them onto the other four senses, inviting them to imagine how the place smelled, felt, sounded, tasted, all the time writing down their words and phrases.

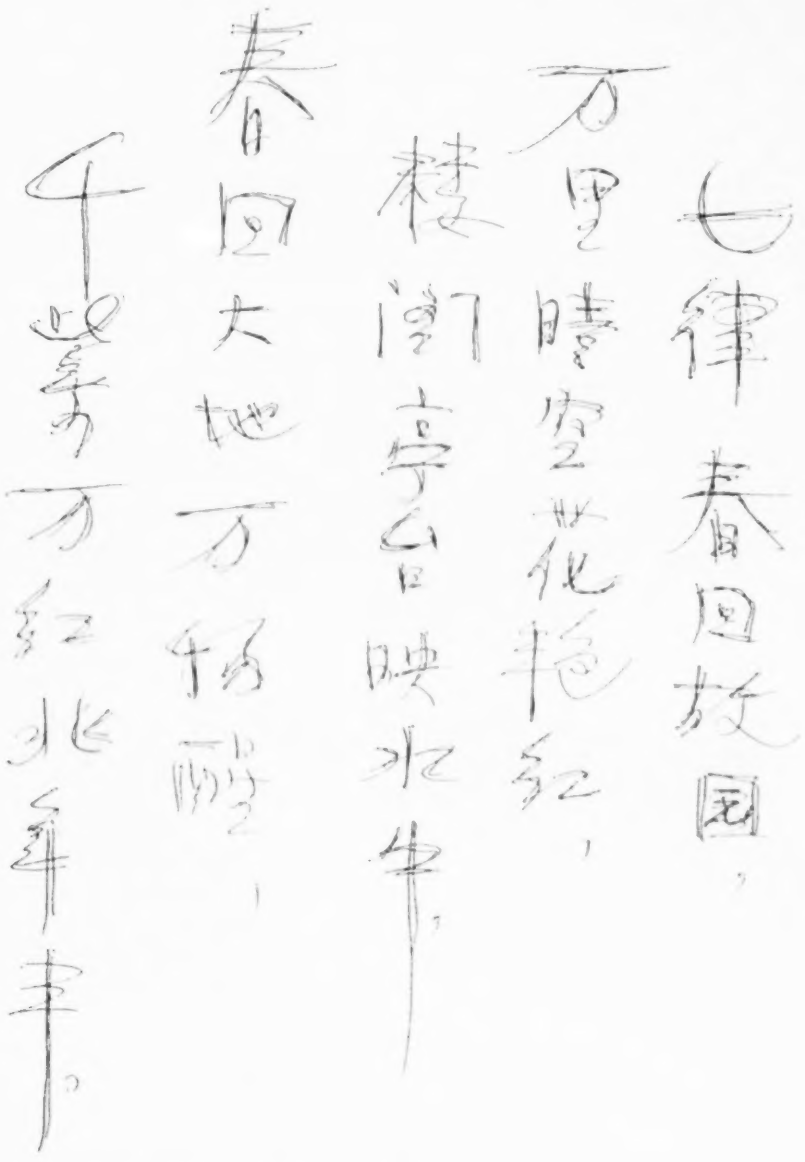
Because there was a product and possibility for performance in mind, and because my students quickly internalized some of the language opportunities embedded in the ancient Chinese poets, and because I trusted the whole process, feeling capable of pushing them to play with words, their sense, feelings and imagery, the poetry took over. So impressed and engaged were they with their own writing that various members of the class began to translate the English draft of their own poem into Chinese. And back and forth it went: discussion, redrafting, laughing and performing—a spontaneous interplay between Chinese and English, all for the sake of perfecting the poem.

When it came time to perform the poem at the reading of poetry sponsored by Bernadette Davidson, Director of the ACORN Child Care Center at the Quincy School, in a celebration of heritage and culture, my class decided that they wanted to read the poem in three languages. Together the whole class would read in Cantonese. One of the more scholarly gentlemen of the class would dictate the poem in Mandarin. (See Long Sen Xue's Chinese translation of "Memory of Early Spring in Wuxi."). And one woman, who the class deemed was proficient in English pronunciation, would read in English. The class drilled themselves for

the performance, continuing to redraft the poetry the whole while. As well as affirming why reading and performance are as integral a part of producing something creative as is writing it, I also watched my students hone their skill of revision. In performing the poems, my students learned how powerful and versatile their own languages could be.

The graciousness of the guest poets, Ted Thomas, Jr., and Sarah Ting, created a welcoming forum for my students. The performance itself contextualized and actually deepened the meaning of the students' poem by teaching them more about appropriately chosen modes of expression. In a spirit of openness, the poet Sarah Ting introduced herself as, first, a student and friend of Ted Thomas, Jr. This acknowledged relationship delighted me, bringing together in my mind the natural connections between teachers and students and learners and writers. This gathering of people who

Memory of Early Spring in Wuxi



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celebrated their varying identities as teachers, students, poets, members of diverse ethnic and racial groups, were all expressing their own stories and struggles, visions and images, and in doing so were creating a very basic and powerful communal narrative, one that my class and I were now part of.

The students' poem, though taken out of the context of its creation and later its performance, still holds its own weight alone and on paper:

Memory of Early Spring in Wuxi

Light pink flowers open
to miles and miles of sky.
Reflection of the house
sits in the green river.
Spring comes. Everything is awake.
But still, the dreams of wanderers are
the same.

An Attempt at Conclusion

Because humane and liberating educating is about placing the needs of the learner at the center and then, as an educator, meeting him or her there in the circle, teaching writing means entering new circles and watching how both your student's consciousness and your own change. Therefore it is no surprise that, when our classrooms become environments of shared stories, histories, and literatures, teachers speak of how much they've learned from their students, hoping secretly that they've taught these students as much as they've learned from them. And what do we learn from our students and the stories and the images that they draft, revise and then later send out into the world, with or without our blessing? Nothing more than a new way of seeing ourselves in relationship to what is around us, hoping for new ways to express that vision so that we can reformulate it again, later, differently. •

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Notes on Contributors

Sam Bernstein has been an ESOL teacher in the Quincy School Community Council's Adult ESOL program in Chinatown for almost ten years. He has co-coordinated two SABES mini-grant projects related to technology and has actively represented his program in the Greater Boston Literacy Telecommunications Collaborative. Sam expects to receive his Masters in Teaching ESOL this summer from UMass Boston.

Dilip Dutt is a political activist with many years of teaching experience in South Africa. Currently underemployed, he is trying to come to terms with the United States' "equal opportunity" society.

Martha Gray teaches ABE and pre-ASE classes at the Dimock Community Health Center in Roxbury. From her students she is learning to fully appreciate the excitement of math, reading and writing.

Xiaowei He came from China to the USA six years ago to study English and forgot to go back. He has been working for four years at the Quincy School Community Council's Adult ESL Program, first as an ESOL teacher and now as coordinator for the Take-and-Give (TAG) Peer Tutoring Program.

Allison Hoskins is the Pre-Vocational/GED instructor at the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts. She is currently pursuing her Masters in Education at Boston University.

Marty Kingsbury is a poet and a playwright. Her work has been produced in the U.S., England, and Australia.

Martha Merson is the ABE/Literacy Specialist at the A.L.R.I. She enjoys using writing to push boundaries and break taboos.

Deborah Schwartz, having taught at various adult literacy programs and community colleges throughout the Boston area, feels a bit more settled at the Quincy School Community Council, where she is currently teaching AESL classes. She's most recently published a short story "In Limbo" as part of an anthology of contemporary love stories entitled *Love Shook my Heart.*

Kerline Auguste Tofuri has been teaching ESOL for four years and has been teaching in the External Diploma Program at the Haitian Multi-Service Center for about two years. "I feel very proud and fortunate to have the chance to make a difference in my community. I enjoy teaching at the Haitian Multi-Service Center and I admire the strength and the determination of my students."

Marsha Watson has been the Transitional Education and Corrections Program Specialist with the Adult & Community Learning Services Cluster at the Massachusetts Department of Education since May 1994. Before moving there, she was the EDP/MELD Coordinator at the Haitian Multi-Service Center. She also spent a year teaching pre-GED to ABE students at the Jamaica Plain Community Center's Adult Learning Program.